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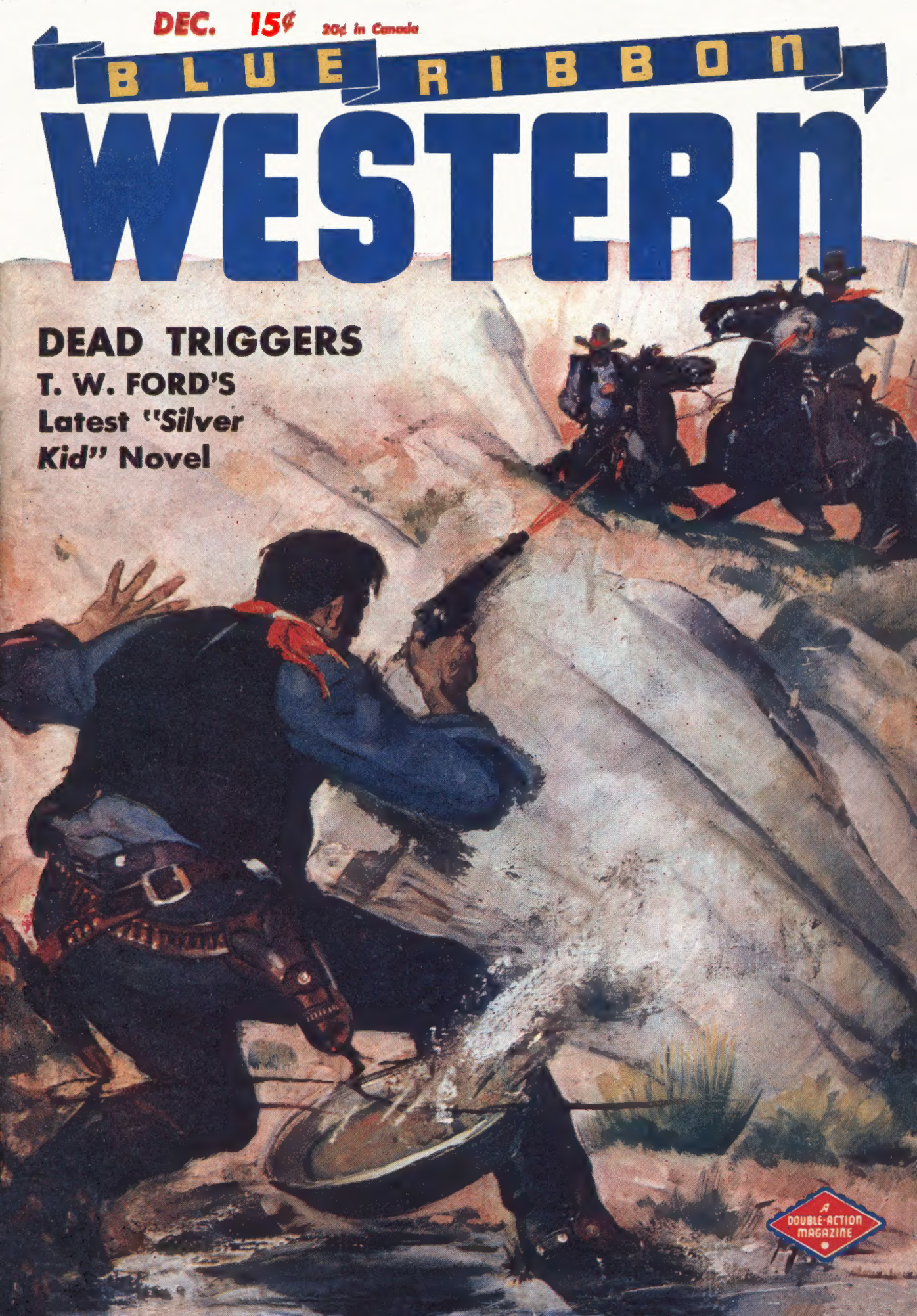
DEAD TRIGGERS

T. W. FORD'S Latest "*Silver Kid*" Novel



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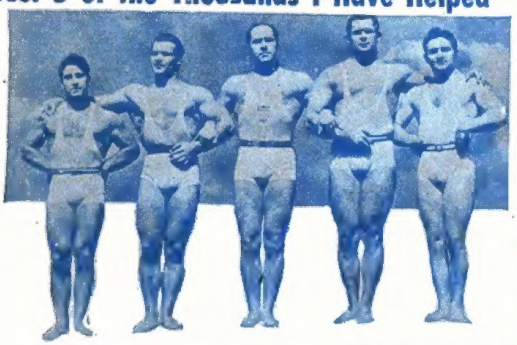

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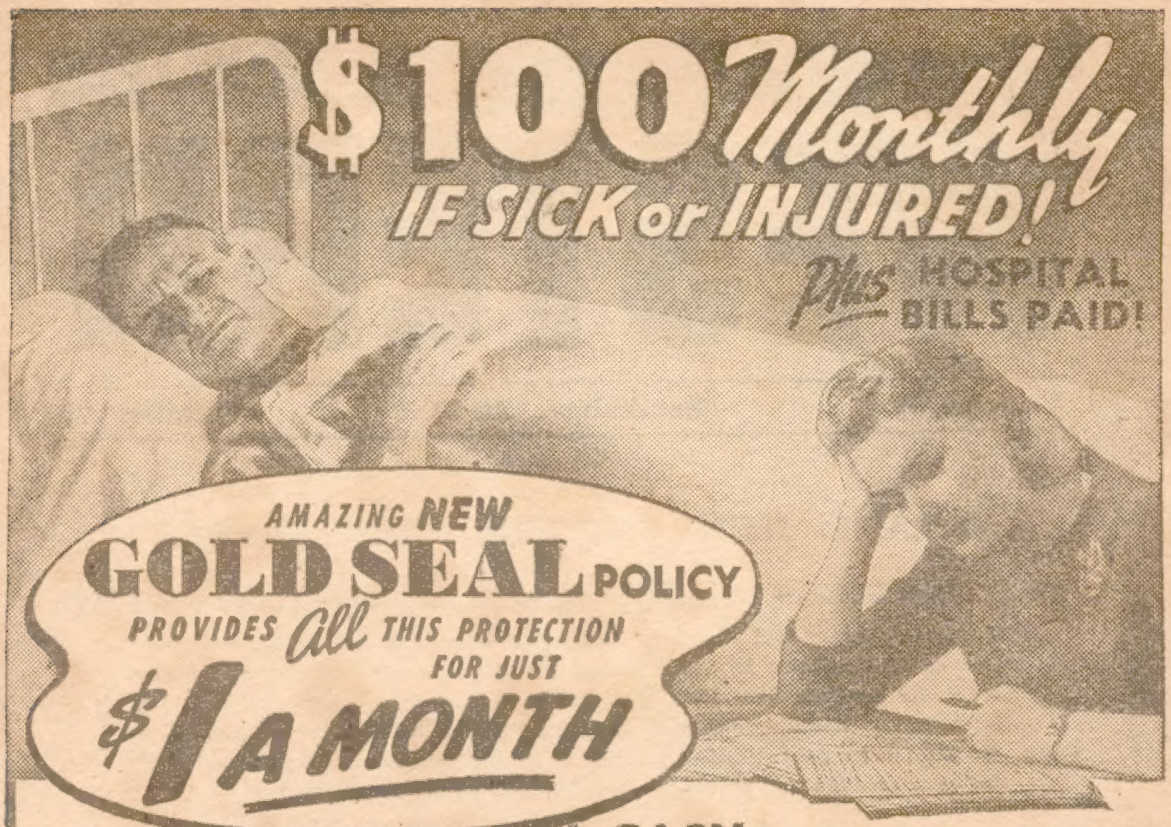

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WESTERN

Volume 8 December, 1945 Number 4

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DEAD TRIGGERS.....**By T. W. Ford** **10**

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SHORT STORIES

GUNS DON'T LIE.....**By Harry Van Demark** **81**

And it was a gun, rather than incriminating circumstances which trapped a killer.

BUCK McKEE — BULL NURSE.....**By Lee Floren** **87**

Buck McKee and his saddle-mate, Tortilla Joe, embark on a mission that seems too just plumb peaceful to be true!

Robert W. Lowndes, Editor

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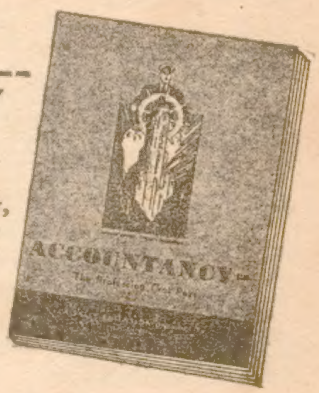

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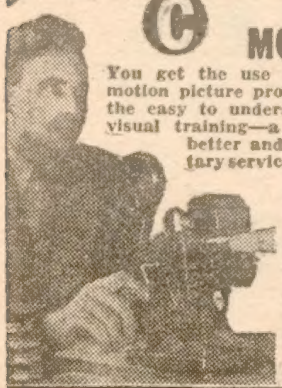

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DEAD TRIGGERS

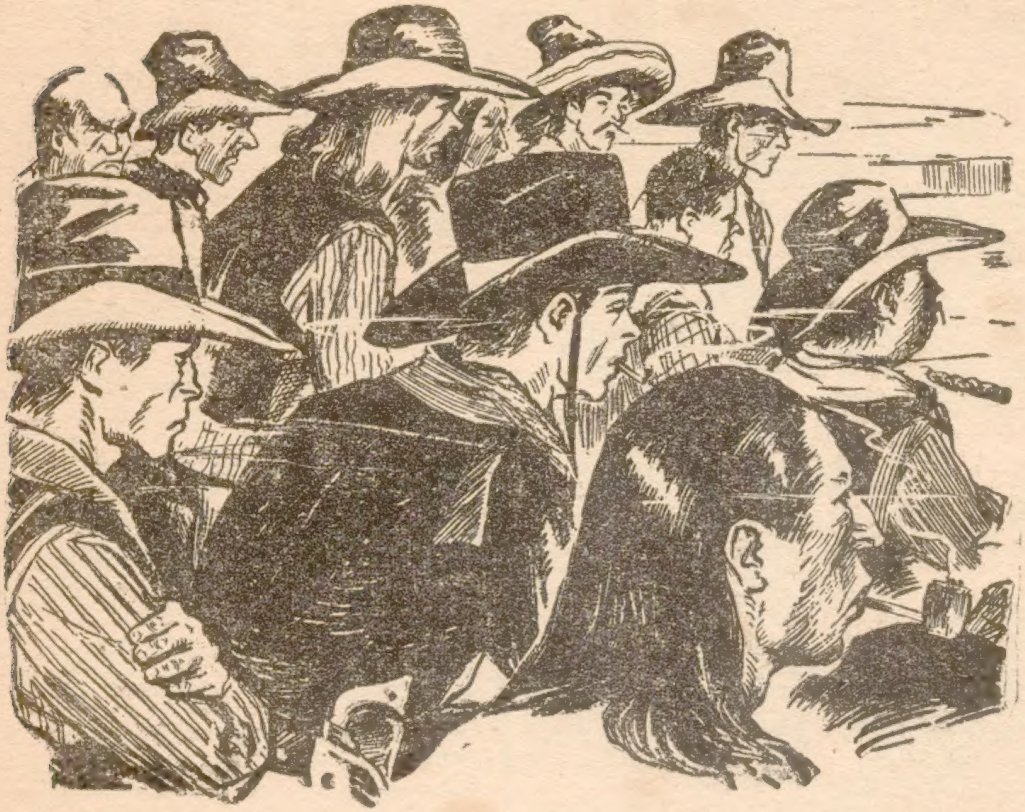
By T. W. Ford

Featuring Solo Strant — The Silver Kid

The hombres Solo Strant threw himself in with seemed to be on the level — out to right a wrong — but something was fishy. Then came that gun duel which left him paralyzed, unable to use his deadly guns for any cause!

CHAPTER I

BECAUSE Deaf John Dean was awaiting trial for murder over in Maverick, the hombre called Randall had to die. The fact that Randall was whitish-haired clinched his candidacy for Boothill. Deaf John, though only thirty-one, had been prematurely white before he started using that hair dye. Now in the Maverick jailhouse, his hair was greasily lank and black so that he resembled a half-drowned pack-rat. Over there, they never sus-



pected he was either white-haired or the notorious Deaf John Dean, the killer. The hombre called Randall was going to die so they would never find out.

It was very simple as Big Man Lobart, political boss of that end of the state, put it. "They got Deaf John behind the bars and he's threatening to blow his mouth off if he's convicted. All right, gents. Two things we gotta do. One of them is to produce a corpse that'll be taken for John Dean. Then they'll never guess it's Dean they got in Maverick. If they knew it was him, it'd be the

Solo watched this travesty of justice as Costello vainly tried to halt the wily city lawyer.

rope sure-fire. And after we got him officially dead, then we got to get him exonerated in Maverick. But—first things first. Somebody known as Deaf John Dean dies. . . ."

So that Randall was going to fill Dean's boots as a corpse. It had been Washita Mount, chief deputy to the marshal of Maverick, who'd spotted Randall and his all-important white hair. Mount got the background on him too. Randall was a trail stray, picking up odd jobs, never able to hold one for long because of his weakness for redeye. He was what the doctor ordered. It was in Iron Hill that they moved in on him, Mount and Sam Sabin of the big Slash-S outside of Maverick, and even the Big Man himself. The Big Man discarded his flowing bow tie and donned rusty black instead of his customary pearl-gray suit for the occasion and kept in the background. He had with him, as a further precaution, his bodyguard, Vetters, a limping man.

Sabin made friends with the doomed Randall in one of the more squalid bars within an hour after Randall had forked a crowbait into town. It seemed almost too easy. Sabin poured drinks into Randall. And then Mount came along and pretended to mistake poor Randall for the dangerous Deaf John Dean. Sabin said he did look a heap like him with that cold look he had in his eyes. Randall pushed back his blue-white hair and admitted as how he had been taken for John Dean on several occasions.

"Why all you need is a silver-studded gunbelt like that Dean always wears and a pair of new fancy boots and you could fool his own mother," they assured him. "Sure thing!" And they spread the word. Randall was a newcomer to Iron Hill so it was easy. The deadly trigger-slammer, Deaf John Dean, was in town incognito, calling himself Randall, they said. And be careful, they added; the limping gent always hanging around somewhere near the so-called Randall was his personal guard.

THE STAGE was set by the next day. Iron Hill was one of those easy-going, wide-open towns where the local Law didn't bother you unless you let daylight through a citizen. So nobody bothered the man said to be John Dean. Sabin sloshed a heap of drinks into him and got him ripe. Sabin tossed a bill onto the bar counter, eyed a thinning roll, and mentioned that he'd have to be getting himself some more dinero soon. Shabby Randall took the bait, saying he wished he knew how to get his hands on money. It was a simple thing if a man had a little nerve, Sabin said. A few more shots of redeye and Randall had the nerve; he wanted to know how it was done.

"Why, if I had a helper, I wouldn't even have to leave town," Sabin mused aloud. "There's a place down at the edge of the town. They—well, they got a heap of money in the cash box. . . It's left there to pay off a gent who runs wet ponies up from Mexico. So you might say it's practically crooked money to begin with. . . ." Little more was necessary.

That evening, Randall, never suspecting how beautifully he was going to be double-crossed, walked into the two-bit joint on one of the smaller roads out of Iron Hill. Aside from a slumbering drunk, the bartender was alone in the place. Randall wore a silver-studded belt and a new pair of boots with silver filigreed toes. Sabin had assured him it would make things easier if they took him for the dreaded Dean. Randall walked in, hauled a pistol, and told the nodding drink-wrangler he wanted every last cent in the house.

Actually there was less than twenty dollars in the cigar box on the back bar. But when the bar boss saw the way Randall swayed in his tracks, the former's hands hesitated over the shotgun beneath the counter. He never needed to use it. Beyond Randall's shoulder he saw the gun being levelled out of the darkness over one of the window sills. Sam Sabin came in a door at the back of the place as he'd told Randall he would. Sabin advanced through the

shadows holding a double-barreled ten-gauge shotgun close to his side.

"Git that dinero!" bawled Randall at the barman, trying to be impressive. They were the last words he ever said.

The gun at the window blew a hole in his back through one kidney. Randall looked like a scarecrow hit by a high wind. His knees broke and his hips came forward and his shoulders jerked backward. His guns bounced off the toes of his fancy boots. He made a fumbling gesture toward Sabin, his supposed friend, then caught at the edge of the table top for a few seconds. Sabin acted. He brought the shotgun to his shoulder a few yards away, took careful aim, and let poor Randall have both barrels flush in the face. By the time Randall hit the floor, he didn't have any face left, only the back half of his head.

The barkeep by that time let go with the shotgun he had brought up. Its charge spattered harmlessly into the opposite wall beyond Randall's prone body. Sabin, hat jammed low, calmly turned and stalked off for the rear door as if nothing of importance had occurred. The bar boss blinked, wondering if this might be all a dream. He started to call to Sabin who tossed the smoking shotgun out the back door and stepped after it. Then Mount, who had fired through the window, came jumping in the front door. The tall plank-bodied deputy from Maverick grabbed the amazed bar boss and clapped his back and pumped his hand, all the time telling him how great he was.

"But it was *you* who got him with that shot through the window, Mister," the barkeep protested.

"MY SLUG just nicked him, Mister. I happened to be passing by; but if he hadn't had to keep watching you as you went for the shotgun, he'd have seen me. Sure. . . .What? No, I didn't see anybody else! It was *you*, Mister, who got the great Deaf John Dean!"

"D-Dean? Deaf J-John?" The barkeep's voice quavered even as he goggled at the dead man on the floor with the crimson spattered through his blue-white hair. "Jehosophat, I thought I'd missed him!"

"With one barrel, maybe. 'S all." Mount stooped over the corpse and came up with a letter apparently from a pocket. "Well, here's all the proof you need, I reckon! I knew I'd recognized him when I looked in the window. This letter here is addressed to 'Mr. John Dean. . . .Care of Red Eagle Bar, Elk Creek. . . .' So there you are. It's him, Dean! He'll never plug another man. He—hey, the bar boss here put out Deaf John Dean's light!" he yelled as the first man drawn by the gun reports rushed in.

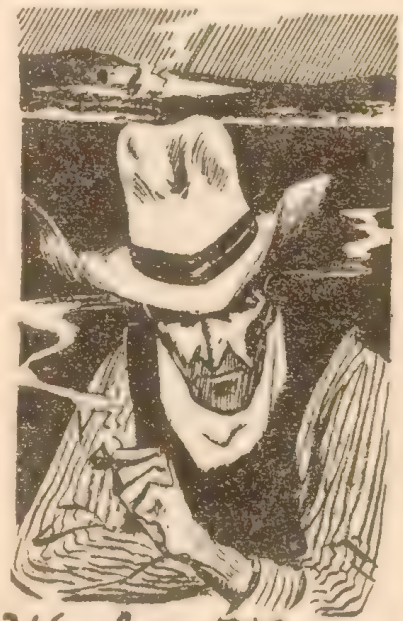
It was Big Man Lobart, the political boss. He had redonned his flowing tie and one of his custom-tailored pearl gray suits now. He was himself again, just having driven into town and clambered down from the horse and buggy up the road.

"Somebody's stopped John Dean—at last?" boomed Lobart as he swung his large shapeless body forward. "Why, I can't bee-lieve it! I can't bee-lieve it! Anybody having nerve enough to draw against Dean—why—

this man here? You did it? By grab, man, it's an honor to take your hand and—" He pumped the bar boss' hand and clapped his back and threw a big bill on the counter for drinks for the throng that was pressing in. "Now tell us all about it, my good friend?"

"Well, I heard talk he was around town. I had an eye peeled." The bar boss was no fool. If nobody else had seen the man at the back end with the shotgun, then damned if he had either. "Minute he came in. . . ."

So Deaf John Dean officially died with his boots on. Vetters appeared briefly on the scene to positively identify him, then vanished from Iron Hill. The word would get the forty odd miles to Maverick soon enough that John Dean was dead. And the real Deaf John, in jail over there under the name of Gregg, would be safe from discovery. Lobart slid a look toward the double front doors of the place. Sabin, the way it had been prearranged, would walk in like any other jasper drawn by the excitement. It would be proof that he had gotten away unnoticed into the clear after executing his part of the job. There was no sign of him; five minutes later, he still had not appeared.



Washita Mount

Sam Sabin lay half unconscious in the brush of a little rise behind the saloon. He had been waylaid as he skulked away from the place after having made Randall faceless with that shotgun. Even as the tall angular gent stepped from behind the tree and ordered him to hoist his dewclaws, Sabin had glimpsed the face the color of a brick. In that flash, he realized he had been seeing the man about Iron Hill during the last few hours. He had tried to lever a gun up, had the tall one's bullet whistle past his arm, then caught a second shot between the ribs. Sabin was short and well larded with beef but wire-tough just the same. Even though in agony and tottering, he landed a glancing blow with his gun barrel on the tall gent's head. It dropped the other to his knees and gave Sabin time to drag himself off and hide in the brush.

Down at the barroom, Lobart looked doorward again. Still no Sabin. Instead a man, tall and bony as a pole topped by a pin-sized head with a bleak red face, stood staring in. He walked in a few stiff strides to stare down at the dead man. His long fingers were wrapped around the lashed-down black holsters on his thighs.

"Deaf John Dean," said another onlooker.

Nichols, the tall red-faced jasper, shook his head imperceptibly, the flinty eyes sliding around to take in every last detail. He knew the dead man was Randall, not John Dean. He wondered why Sabin had wanted him dead. He knew that Sabin, who had given him the slip, kept his pony in the livery-barn beside the Iron Hill House. Nichols left and headed for there, quite certain Sam Sabin would be pulling out of town right soon.

CHAPTER II

LOBART laid down the law to Sam Sabin, his side bandaged up, and coffin-faced surly Washita Mount. "I'm returning to Iron Hill tonight. We mustn't be seen together too much, especially going back into Maverick. Jackson

Bartlett, the best lawyer in St. Louis, will be down to defend Deaf John—I mean, Gregg." He glanced about apprehensively. "For the information of the public, you're the one who has hired him, Sabin! So—"

They had met at the juncture of two roads some nine-ten miles beyond Iron Hill. A few hundred feet on was a crossroads house, a ramshackle place crouched in the moonlight behind a leaning sign that said, "Grub and drinks, H. Friend, Prop." Despite the flesh wound in his side, Sabin jerked up straight in the stirrups in the clearing.

Sam Sabin

"Holy hell! Me, I'm bringing Jackson Bartlett in? Why?" He swore softly between the perfect white teeth customary flashing in his always smiling face. Sabin looked like one of the friendliest men the Lord had ever created; he made a business of looking that way. He swore again. "Shucks, Lobart, that aims the finger of suspicion right smack at me!"

Big Man Lobart was an apparently imperturbable mass of human flesh. Only his upper lip curled. "Well? Did you ever hear of any man being stabbed to death by the finger of suspicion, Sam? What in tarnation is suspicion anyway? Why it's just malicious gossip, rumor. If the talkers *knew* what they were talking about, there wouldn't be suspicion. It would be conviction then. Ha-ha."

"And conviction has a habit of being accompanied by a rope. The two seem to go together like ham and eggs, Lobart. Suspicion can lead to conviction, too. Nits make flies, don't they?"

Lobart palmed his mouth and the folds of his jaws. The gesture had the effect of pulling down a shade on the window of his cold-eyed face. He looked like a stuffed owl when he said, "All right, Sam, but somebody's got to be hiring the lawyer. Washita can't—not with him supposed to be on the Law's side. And, hells bells, I can't. Why should I be interested in some little two-bit down in Maverick's jail? Nope. That'd rouse a heap of smoke. Of course, we're *all* in this."

"That's all right," Washita Mount picked it up. "All of us. Hell, who put the lead—the slug that killed—inta Randall tonight? Me! If Dean starts to talk, we're all gallows bait. But I took a chance; if it got out that me, a lawman, shot Randall. . . . What're you belly-aching about, Sabin?"

"Why Sam understands now, I'm sure," said Lobart placatingly, shifting his weight so the buggy creaked with the strain. He was the typical politician, always ready to compromise, and never letting a man forget a favor. "I'm putting out dinero for expenses and other-r-r things." He was hinting at those notes of Sabin's he had persuaded friends to hold.

Sabin bit his lower lip and nodded quickly. "Sure, sure. I'm hiring Bartlett of St. Louis. I'm real interested in Gregg, a perfect stranger, in the jailhouse."

"He's going to have a heap of friends soon. I've got things planned," Big Man Lobart said sagely. They talked of some other details. "Remember, you're just interested in seeing justice, done, Sam." Lobart picked up the reins and clucked to the team and turned the buggy to head back for Iron Hill. Sam Sabin and Mount walked their ponies on down toward

the crossroads house in the moonlight.

IT ALL SEEMED innocuous enough, three men who'd met on the road and swapped a few words; the suspicions of Solo Strant, watching from a window in the crossroads place, had not been roused by any of the trio. A single low-turned lamp with a grimy chimney alone burned in the back corner by the bar. It was dim over by the front window where Solo stood; he could see the moonlit slope perfectly. And he had spotted the fourth one, the rider who had slipped through the notch furtively after the other two horsemen. When they had stopped to talk with the big man in the buggy, the rider had waited out of sight behind a piece of outcropping rock. Now, as the pair, Sabin and Washita Mount, came on down to the place, the other one poked his head over the rock and watched. He shifted slightly in the milky glow of the moon and the Kid, Solo Strant, caught the fiery red hue of his face.

The two men dropped off at the hitchrail beside the crossroads place and came into the bar. Mount raked Solo Strant, the Silver Kid, with the typical badge-packer's look, the look that took it for granted a man must be guilty of something. Solo Strant in his shabby black seemed like just another grub-line rider. Sabin and Mount went down to the rude bar and ordered whisky.

"From the bottle you ain't flavored with well water yet, hombrecito," snorted Mount. "Rust in my belly makes me plumb bad-tempered. . . . Plumb." He tossed off the contents of his shot glass and refilled it, glaring when the little owner started to pick up more of the change. "The first one was just to sample the stuff, mister," Mount said warningly. He pulled a badge from his pocket and flashed it briefly. The Kid noted that.

Solo cut his eyes out the window again. The rider who'd been spying on the others had not appeared again. But the Kid caught the tinkle of a spur chain from the brush at the edge of the clearing. After another drink, Mount left, riding off to the southeast. The red-faced gent did not come out of hiding to trail him. The Kid found his fingers rubbing the miniature silver skull hung from the chinstrings of his hat. The gesture was a never-miss sign gunpowder was due to be burnt in the near future.

SAM SABIN asked about a bed for the night. The proprietor, Friend, a big man with a dry hacking cough, picked up the lamp and led the way up the stairs in the other corner. Half orey-eyed, he stumbled several times. He had forgotten all about the Kid's presence. A couple of seconds later, the Kid stepped noiselessly from a side door and drifted off through the shadows.

He didn't have long to wait. Friend came down, took another drink sloshing half of it down his shirt front. He dropped the bar across the front door and fumbled at the window shutters. From his place in the high grass beside one of the outbuildings, Solo Strant saw him go into a room off the bar. Friend drew off his boots, dropped across the Teton pole cot, and dozed off with the lamp still burning. Inside of a few minutes a boot scraped cautiously up the road a bit. A stray strand of cloud masked the moon at that moment.

There was a scraping straining sound at the shutters of a front window. When the Kid worked forward, he saw the shutters hanging open. The front door was opened from inside. A crouched figure darted from a clump of brush and scuttled inside. The Kid stood with his criss-crossed arms poised on gun butts. That was a surprise. He had figured on only one of them, not two. As yet, he didn't know what the game was.

Sliding along the front wall of the place Strant eased inside, too. In the back of the barroom, the stairs creaked. One of them was going up after Sabin. The Kid had his Colts sliced out now, the hammers eared back. He was remembering that Sabin had been with a John Law and—an animal-like squeamish sensation of danger chilled his backbone.

Gun flame lanced from the top of the stairs. It slanted downward, coming from a gun at the top. The crash mushroomed in the barroom deafeningly. Then the scream of a hit man stabbed through it. Solo Strant with his eyes, catlike in the darkness, had already picked out the second hombre, the one he had seen go in the door. Before he could make his play, there was the rustle of a leaping body behind him. He pulled his head to one side just in time to avoid the full force of the down-chopping gun barrel. But it hit him a glancing blow, crushed down onto his left shoulder with numbing force, sent him staggering over against the wall.

And the orey-eyed owner, Friend, wakened by the shots, appeared in the doorway of his room. He stood holding the lamp and staring around glassy-eyed, drugged by the alcohol in his brain. It was incredible the way he stood there blinking with the lead slamming about the main downstairs room. The Kid saw the man halfway down the stairs, bony and red-faced. He was squeezing a flesh wound in his left forearm. At the head of the stairs crouched Sabin. Blood ran from a bullet gash across his cheek. The second one of the intruders was over by Friend, covering him and half swivelling as he watched the rest of the room. The third one was off behind Solo Strant beside a post.

ALL HELL was spitting loose again in the next instant. The Kid faded behind a table, able to operate his right-hand gun; that chopped away savagely. After all, he knew the hombre who'd been with Sabin was a John Law, so that meant Sabin himself was no lobo. The Kid sent one slug ripping leftward at the man who'd slugged him from behind.

"The Silver Kid!" roared the man as the Kid shot, and the gent was diving for cover.

The Kid sent a bullet gouging the floor beside the second one of the party. Solo still didn't know what it was all about. It seemed like a holdup. Lead spattered wood from the table top close by him. The man on the stairs had turned from the bowed-headed Sabin to try to get the Kid too. The latter ducked beneath another table and reappeared on the other side of it. Only he knew how lucky they were that he could sling but one gun, his left one useless with the arm limp from the shoulder blow.

His appearance as he shifted and darted was deceptive in the guttering lamplight. In the rusty, trail-worn black garb, with the boyish face, and a half-pint of a jasper in the bargain, Solo Strant was a far cry from the picture of the typical gunman. He looked as if he might be down on his luck. The sleepy heavy-lidded eyes beneath the ragged black hair over his forehead made him seem even milder. But under the boyish face was the tipoff on the Kid's real identity, the tiny silver skull joining the chin-strings of his hat.

Men who had never clapped eyes on the Kid knew about the grisly little skull. It matched the other silver trappings on the Kid. There were his spurs with the rowels fashioned from Mex silver dollars. The flaps of his brush-scarred batwings chaps had big conchas of silver, too. The twin row of buttons down the front of his double-breasted black shirt were of the same metal. So also were the spangles on the band of his black weather-warped sombrero. And the Colts leaping about in his slim hands were silver-stocked as well, glinting from beneath the heels of his hands in the lamplight.

THE NEXT instant, the glint was gone. The Kid had just sent the second man, the one he had followed in, leaping behind the bar for cover with a shot. Simultaneously, Nichols on the stairs switched his fire and crashed the lamp in Friend's hand with a bullet. The chimney spattered around and the wick blew out. Then silence settled though the tension was like a scream.

"Fer the lovva Gawd, I ain't done nothing," husked Friend in the stillness. And the Kid realized one of them, as they prepared to withdraw, had a gun in the proprietor's side.

Furtive boot steps followed. The Kid didn't dare shoot lest he injure Friend. Then the door was jerked open and they made a dark mass as they pushed quickly through it. The Kid risked moving after that. He got the shutters of a side window open and eeled over the sill. When he stepped to the front they were hustling up for the edge of the clearing with poor Friend in tow. He fired again. There was a curse and two of them turned and dashed for the cover of the foliage.

The Kid closed in zigzagging. Wind stirred foliage and a band of moonlight came through the trees. Solo saw it was the tall angular red-faced one who still held Friend a hostage as he withdrew. The Kid called out. The back-tracking Nichols was at the fringe of the brush. His arm speared from it with a levelled Colts. The latter blinked evilly at the Kid, and the charging Solo Strant, having shifted his left gun to his right hand, rode that trigger hard.

One of the smother of slugs he threw at the arm found its target. Nichols' spitting gun jumped upward out of his hand. There was a short cry from him. His numbed outstretched gun hand dripped red from a bullet track across the back of it. In that moment, Friend broke free and flung back into the clearing, sliding on his face over the dirt.

It was all the Kid could do. Nichols' two pards came piling up to him with the horses. They slapped lead at the Kid who was forced to flatten behind a boulder. Then the trio wheeled and went high-tailing it over the low rise. Solo knew they would be clear away before he could get the saddle slung on his own paint back in the shed.

But one of them bore his bullet brand, the crimson crease across the back of his hand. And any man who bore that gun sign was ticketed for Boothill inevitably. . . .

"We'll find Deaf John Dean yet, by grab!" drifted back Nichols' cry.

CHAPTER III

DOWN THE crosstrail from the north, Washita Mount came slamming on his cayuse just as the echoes of the last gunshot died. "Sabin? Sam?" he bawled. "Are you all right?"

Sabin stepped out the door, holding a bandanna to his sliced cheek. He tossed the black hair back from his mahogany-hued face, drew up his wide heavy shoulders, and turned in some plain and fancy swearing. "It was something to do with that Randall," he told Mount low-voiced. "It was the same red-faced gent who jumped me back of the bar where we fixed Randall. Say, what brought you back, Washita?"

The big deputy to the marshal of Maverick thumbed at Solo Strant across the clearing. "Him. . . . Got thinking of him going up the road and I didn't like his looks. So—"

Sabin grabbed the deputy's heavy arm. "Not so danged loud, bullhead! Know who he is? Solo Strant, the Silver Kid. He jumped those buzzards or they'd have my hide pegged to the side of the barn now!"

"Well, we don't want him hanging around," Washita Mount said heavily. "Ever'body knows how that Strant is a straight-shooter and pure poison to anybody bucking the Law. So—"

"You damn fool, Mount! This Kid is just what we can use back in Maverick. . . . This is perfect. He saw some coyotes try to cut me down. We're all right—in his eyes. . . ." He moved toward the Kid who walked back toward the crossroads place. "Hey there, pard, are you all right? Friend, git us some redeye here!" he added as he saw the Kid rubbing his numbed shoulder.

"I'm all right," the Kid said with that sleepy-eyed smile. "Just danged disappointed I didn't stop one of them pelicans. . . . Say, what did they man by yelling they'd find Deaf John Dean?" he added as they went back inside.

"They must be locoed," said the unsmiling Mount at the bar inside. "Dean was shot down by a bartender over at Iron Hill earlier tonight.

What're you doing around here anyway, mister?"

Solo Strant didn't like the way suspicion soured Mount's tone. Or the insulting sneer in his eyes. "If this is your baliwick, badge packer," the Kid drawled back coldly, "you shouldn't be afeared to hang out your star in plain sight. And even if it is, there are healthier ways of asking—"

"Sure, sure," said Sabin, moving between them. "I'm dang glad he was here. Don't you know better 'n to look a gift horse in the mouth, Washita? Ha-ha. I know, too, why they yelled about Dean!. . . ."

"Why?"

"To cover up. Maybe they hoped to confuse us. Sure, that was it!" Sabin had a quick hurry-up way of speaking as if he had to tell it before he rushed off somewhere. "Sure. Just a cover up. Washita, that big red-faced one was the same gent who warned me the other day not to try to save Gregg from the rope."

"Was it?" said Mount, knuckling his temple bewilderedly. The deputy marshal was just a big high-stacked hunk of meat. He had the blind physical courage of an animal, walking into anything without a second thought. As so often in such cases, because of his bravery, folks put him down for a paragon. His stupidity was explained as the taciturnity of a wise man. His instinct to browbeat and bully was translated as the man's conscientiousness in executing the law. He had trouble keeping up when a smart man talked. It was always with relief that dour Mount turned to the gun when the excuse arose. "Ya didn't tell me any—"

SABIN CUT him off. "They got a prisoner named Gregg over in the Maverick jail, Mr. Strant. The poor devil is innocent but certain parties are plumb interested in getting him hung. I've brought in a lawyer to defend him, so now those same parties are after me."

"I sabe," said the Kid.

"And now they'll be after you," Sabin said, lowering his voice warningly. "They recogized you. One of 'em bawled your name."

The Kid cocked an eyebrow, amused. "Who are they?"

Sabin shrugged. "That's what makes it so hard to defend yourself against 'em. They're gun-slicks hired by those who want to see that Gregg strung up to protect themselves. But that's all I do know; don't know their handles or their faces."

"I'll know one of 'em when I cut his sign again," the Kid murmured in his strangely soft voice. He was thinking of his gun sign on the man.

"So that's why you better come along with me—with us," Sabin clinched it. "Alone, you could be cut down too danged easily by those coyotes. Yes, I know how you're the Silver Kid all right. But, like my pop used to say, the toughest pelican can't talk a bullet outa his back."

Solo Strant nodded. Yes, he would string along with Sabin a piece. His curiosity was roused. He still wanted to know the explanation of that parting shout by the would-be killers. That stuff about finding Dean yet. Because the Kid knew Dean, had even met up with him once, and he knew him for one of the most vicious, most treacherous creatures the Almighty had ever made. Deaf John Dean was reviled even among his own breed, the owlhooters. Dean had been blasted down in an attempted hold-up of a barroom according to that marshal's deputy. Yet it was strange the bony red-faced one and his mates hadn't heard about it. The death of Deaf John Dean would be news.

"SURE, I'LL string along with you gents a spell," Solo said. He went out to saddle up his pony. Sabin wanted to go along, but the Kid pooh-poohed him; he knew the killers wouldn't be back. "Killers?" he repeated softly and questioningly as he stepped out into the humid night. Now that he thought it over, it didn't seem as if they had tried very hard to kill that Sam Sabin—if they had meant to kill him at all. It was the lank leader who had been nicked on the stairs by Sabin while the latter had received a mere scratch across the cheek. And when the proprietor

had come in with his lantern, they had not even attempted to burn down Sabin.

"I don't get the idee of this," muttered Washita Mount sullenly back at the bar. "This Kid is a dangerous man. He can be very dangerous to us, I say. And I say—"

"Washita, don't try to do your own thinking. . . Look. The Silver Kid is practically a legend across the Southwest, ain't he? Sure, sure. All right: to these people, he's the prince on the white charger like you used to read about in fairy tales. He can't do no wrong, the side he's on is always the right one."

"Fairy tales?" said Washita Mount. "What're them?"

"They—forget it, Washita. You probably never read a book. But listen, for Gawd's sake! With Strant the Kid on our side, back in Maverick folks will figure we must be right and that damn Judge Holy Ben Batt is in the wrong for once!"

Mount pulled at his lip. "We could settle things with some shooting," he opined. "Put a window in the skulls of the right men and—"

"There'll be gunning afore that trial is over, I'm afraid," Sabin admitted. "And then we'll have this Kid on our side in that too. Sabe?" It wasn't clear that Mount did but the Kid came back then, poking his head in the door as he led his pony around.

Inside of a few minutes, the three of them were heading down the trail toward Maverick. They travelled at a stiff gallop till they had crossed Crazy Woman Creek and swung onto the rolling open tableland beyond it. Then, under a gray-fringed globe of moon, Sabin gave the Kid a picture of conditions in Maverick. It was a prejudiced version of them. Plenty was left out by Sam Sabin who had a sharp wily mind behind the affable friendly face apt to throw a man off his guard.

"THIS GREGG they got in jail is a poor friendless jasper," Sabin lied. "Guess that's why I sided him in the beginning. Reckon I must sound like a double-barrelled dang fool, Strant. I try to tell myself I'm a hard man—if a just one. But I always have had a soft spot inside me for the underdog; most gents wouldn't understand that, I reckon."

"I guess I know how you feel," the Kid said. It was the way he had always played it. "You figure he's innocent?"

"I plumb well know it; at least, he shouldn't hang."

"Course he's innocent," put in Mount heavily.

"Then why has the Law got him in jail? You're a John Law. I don't savvy that. You—"

"Some hairpins ask too danged many questions!" Mount glared over at the Kid. When Washita Mount didn't have the answer he always grew bellicose.

"The Law had to pick him up," Sabin took over quickly. "There was a question of a stolen horse, and Washita, he's just deputy to the marshal, Bengoll anyways. But it's outa their hands now. It's that Holy Ben Batt, the hanging judge, we're up against now. He's so all-fired proud of his reputation for brimstone-and-fire hanging justice with his sixty-second juries!"

"Uh-huh." The Kid was skeptical. Holy Ben Batt was known across the Southwest as a paragon of justice and fearlessness. Even on the outtrails, among the owlhoot gentry themselves, they said Holy Ben Batt would sentence his own blood and flesh to the rope if he was convinced the man was guilty. "But how can he condemn a man to hang over stealing a pony if there's a question of doubt?"

Mount started to speak but Sabin overtalked him. "Well, they claimed this—uh—Gregg," he was speaking of Deaf John Dean, of course, "that he shot and killed a man over the horse."

"And he didn't?"

"A man was shot, but Gregg didn't do it; it was a gent with him." Sabin was piling lie on lie.

"Then why not find him and make him confess?"

"That fella that was with him is

dead, but he confessed that he did it before he died of his wounds." They had paused while Sabin lighted up a stogie. In the flare of the match his face was bland and guileless. That had been the biggest lie yet. There had been no confession by the man with John Dean, the so-called Gregg. Sabin's statement that he had died of his wound was only half a lie though. Sam Sabin himself had shot him dead, then sworn afterward the man confessed the killing to him.

CHAPTER IV

THE KID was baffled by that. "Well, if he confessed to you, that ought to clear this Gregg gent in court."

Sabin grimaced. "The hoeman the pony was taken from, he swears it was Gregg who did the killing. And me—well, frankly, Kid, I might as well admit it to you. I did time once over a shooting, so my word won't count for much at the trial. I've been told it won't!" Again he was lying. The truth was he didn't dare testify with his lie lest they began to investigate. Then if it was brought out that he had an earlier connection with the so-called Gregg, he would be in hot water. And if Gregg was unmasked as Deaf John Dean, Sam Sabin's own head would be in the noose.

"You ask a hell of a lot of questions," Mount said truculently to Solo Strant.

"Why shouldn't he?" put in Sabin quickly. He was playing for heavy stakes here. The Kid on their side would be a big ace in their hand. He didn't want to make Solo suspicious. "I want him to see just how things stand here." Sabin almost choked on that one himself. If this dangerous Kid with the deadly swift draw knew the truth. . . .

The truth was that Big Man Lobart and Sam Sabin himself and Mount had to get Dean off or they'd all end up behind bars, if not dancing on air at the end of a rope, themselves. There was that little matter of the homestead rights in Jacinta Valley some years ago. The three of them had worked with the Federal land agent on that one. The land agent had failed to advertise until the last minute that the government had opened up that reservation for homesteading. Lobart and Sabin and Mount had formed a syndicate, under cover, to grab off all the land in the valley. Using dummies, they had filed claims before the general public was aware what was going on, then rushed in a bunch of trail tramps and saloon toughs to occupy the claims and establish the required legal residence.

Homesteaders and others arriving belatedly to settle in the big valley off to the west had found practically all the land gone. There had been an uproar and considerable trouble, but the trio had imported a bunch of trigger slammers to back up their illegal possession. Then they had proceeded to cash in by selling out through their dummies at the height of all the commotion, inciting a wild inflation by spreading rumors there was oil beneath the ground in the lush Jacinta Valley. The country had gone locoed.

And then the ruthless money-hungry trio had pulled the final coup. In the surge of speculation, through their dummies, they had run in bogus deeds and false bills of sale. That was where Mount played his part. Wielding the authority of the Law, it was his duty to oust purchasers from claims for which they did not have bona fide papers. When a cheated purchaser was too stubborn it had been easy to trump up some false charge against him and make it so hot the poor duped devil found it best to quit the country. While it lasted it had been like a back-wash of Hell up there in the Jacinta. Hardly an hour of the day or night passed without the spatter of gunshots. Blood ran like a river. And through it all the trio were busy selling over again the claims they had repossessed by the ruse of the bogus deeds.

GOVERNMENT authorities moved in to investigate. The three had pulled out of the picture

after putting a bullet in the brains of the land agent to silence him. Lobart and Sabin and Mount had emerged wealthy. But Deaf John Dean had stepped up with his claim then, practically putting a gun in their backs.

Dean had been leader of the gunman pack they had brought in to hold their illegal claims in the Jacinta. They had figured him for a chuckhead who was locoed on the trigger and who could be told almost anything. But when Dean walked in on them after it was all over, he held the high cards. He knew every move of the game they had played and named names. He had enough evidence against them to put them in the penitentiary for life. They had been amazed; it seemed incredible a deaf man—Dean had to be looking right smack at a man so he could read his lips to hear anything—could have picked up so much. Later they learned that this Deaf John Dean had a rep for having ears in the ground, for somehow being able to hear the grass grow, everywhere he went. He was a virtual mine of information, knowing everything that was going on wherever he was.

It had been practically a Mexican standoff. They had to split their heavy winnings with Dean as the price for his silence. And now that he had been grabbed off by the Law right smack back in Maverick some years since the Jacinta thing, he was blackmailing them again. Dean sent them the word that he was to be gotten off Scot free at the trial or he would spill everything he knew.

That was the picture. Lobart and Sabin and Mount were as good as fighting to save their own necks from the noose. That Randall had died so he could play the role of the corpse of Deaf John Dean; with Dean officially accepted as dead, there would be little danger of the true identity of the man in the Maverick jailhouse, the so-called Gregg, becoming known. That was the first step, according to Lobart. The second would be that of getting Gregg off at the trial. That was going to be tough.

SABIN cursed silently as he had so many times since the thing had broken. Why in tarnation had Dean had to get himself caught in the Maverick country! It seemed he had been s l a m m i n g up Bitterwater Creek, chased by some other lobos he had double-crossed. Dean's w o u n d e d horse had collapsed under him. He and the saddle pard with him had tried to sneak another animal away from a hoeman's place. It had been the place of the Hawker brothers. There had been shooting. Eb Hawker had been killed on the spot and his brother, Gene, left for dead. Dean himself had sustained a bad leg wound, had been forced to hole up in the Broken Tooth Hills.

Realizing the danger to himself, Sam Sabin had ridden with the posse that went into the rough broken country to get the killer. Sabin had gotten to him first. Dean had been too sick and weak to be snaked away. So Sabin had calmly killed his saddle pard and come up with the story of the alleged confession when the rest of the posse came in. It might have stuck if Gene Hawker had not failed to die as expected. Instead, the Hawker brother had somehow pulled through and identified Dean, now calling himself Gregg, as the one who had slain his brother. So Gregg was held in jail awaiting trial.

"SO YOU see, Kid," Sabin said aloud, "this poor devil, Gregg, is plumb innocent. But he's going to be railroaded. Gregg wasn't even there when the pony was taken, but the dead man's brother is going to testify Gregg did the killing."

They paused at a spring to water the ponies. "Why in blazes should he do that?" the Kid wanted to know as he weighed the thing.

Sabin had a well-oiled tongue and was ready for that. "Because he's been told to by somebody higher up, that's why. Somebody who is out to protect another party. I don't want to say whom now. Mebbe-so later I'll get the proof. But that Gene Hawker has been warned how to testify so Gregg'll be hung and the case will be considered closed. . . Hawker's

been warned how to testify just like I been warned not to try to testify at the trial."

Mount stared at Sabin with his jaw a-jar. This was a new story to him; it almost sounded true.

"You've been warned, Sabin?"

"Uh-huh, Kid. Indirectly. Holy Ben Batt wants this Gregg strung up and won't brook no trouble on it. I been warned all right, even shot at. I've had to take steps to protect myself." Sabin stuck out his jaw. "But I'm not backing water and let an innocent man die for anybody. And tonight, you saw them try to get me again. That lanky red-faced gent—he warned me before not to interfere, like I said—he's been hired by the people interested in getting this Gregg hung."

The Kid nodded. After all, he had seen with his own eyes. Had seen those jaspers skulk in to try to cut down Sabin or, at least, grab him off.

"How they knew Mount and I were that way to check on some fresh evidence I can't figure though," Sabin added.

Mount had one of the few bright ideas of his life then as he cocked an eye at the clouds gathering before the moon face. "Ye-ah, that's it. And them gents yelling how they'd find John Dean yet—that makes 'em sound like they was John Laws on a man-hunt for the outlaw."

"That's it exactly, Washita. Just what I was going to say, by grab!"

"How do you plan to save this Gregg?" the Kid asked.

That had Sabin stopped for a moment. He had ideas, but not the kind the Silver Kid would approve of. He stalled over fitting a fresh stogie into his mouth. "Well. . . we got just one hope. To catch one of these hired gun-slicks they're using to try to drive me outa the country—and make him give a sworn statement naming who is paying him his gunman's wages. . ."

A LITTLE later they turned up a draw where Sabin knew there was a line rider's camp. They could bed down there for the rest of the night. Things had begun to percolate through Washita Mount's thick skull. He could see the manifold advantages of having Strant on their side of the fence.

"But, Sam," he said after the Kid had gone down to the nearby creek to fill the bucket from the cabin, "do you figure he'll come in with us? He ain't said yes or no yet; all he's got is your story of things."

Sabin winked. "Didn't you hear me tell him he'll be marked because he sided me in the fight back there?"

"Uh-huh."

"All right. He'll have more than my story to back things when an attempt is made on his own life. And I'll see that that attempt is made. Leave it to me. Just wait; when an hombre gits shot at by one side—he usually throws in with the other side pronto—and with blood in his eye."

"Mebbe the other side—Judge Batt's—won't shoot at him," said Mount, reverting to his usual dumb self.

"Leave things to me," Sabin said quickly as he heard the Kid returning. "Holy Ben Batt ain't having anybody shot at, of course. But I'll see that this Kid *thinks* he is!. . .But I'd like to know who it was tried to git me tonight back there. . ."

CHAPTER V

IT WAS the day after the gunning at the crossroads place down from Iron Hill. Red Nichols, gaunt and raw-boned and with that brick-colored face, stood in the sitting room of Judge Holy Ben Batt's modest white cottage on the hill overlooking Mavrick. Across the worn carpet from him, Holy Ben Batt himself had one hand shoved in the pocket of his loose black coat.

"I know you, Nichols," Batt said stiffly. He was a short, small man but he had the bass-deep rumbling voice of a large man.

Nichols gave a bleak smile and shook his head slowly. "Things have changed, judge. Sure, I used to be the Nichols who followed the owl-hoot. A killer, they called me."

"Save your wind, Nichols," said Batt coldly. "I know your record and

I know your breed. Yes—killer, by Gawd!"

Red Nichols' flinty eyes shuttered once in a somehow ineffably weary gesture. "Killer. . . Strange how if a man rides a trigger and he's lucky enough to be wearing a tin badge or had a good rep to start with—well, that makes things a heap different."

"You'll have me weeping in a minute, Nichols," Batt said. And behind the deep controled voice was the venom of a man who hated the lawbreaker with something as deep as instinct. Batt sneered. "I know your breed. And once a man takes to the gun—well, life don't let him hang them up much afore he's on his way to Boothill. Don't tell me—"

Nichols reached inside the breast pocket of his coat, careful to make the move slowly. "Like to see a governor's pardon, judge?" He passed over a folded document. When Holy Ben Batt said he had heard no news, official or otherwise, about Nichols being pardoned, the latter nodded. "It was kept a secret at my request, judge."

Batt opened the paper and read it through twice, peering at the governor's signature carefully at the bottom. He nodded; it was genuine. The judge took his hand out of the side pocket where he had a short-barrelled .38. He went over and opened the door and told the special deputy on guard at his place that it was all right.

"Kept a secret," the judge picked up Nichols' last words. "Why?"

"Because I haven't hung up my guns, judge." The corner of his mouth twitched at Batt's start. "I'm out to do a certain job the Law has been unable to do. . . This letter from the governor attests to that." He produced another paper.

BATT'S small blue eyes bugged from his face at that reference to his beloved Law, and also at Nichols' blunt admission that he had *not* hung up his hoglegs. Batt took the letter but did not scan it at once. His eyes switched to the pair with Nichols.

Nichols nodded slightly. "Friends, judge. . . Maybe it is better you don't know their names right now. Yes, they're wanted men all right, but right now they've abandoned their usual pursuits—to help me on this mission. And there are a couple more who—well, maybe they're self-conscious because their faces are on a few reward handbills—so they didn't come in."

Batt's eyes swung to the door into the hall. That special deputy would be just outside, and more on the grounds. One of Nichols' companions slid a hand to a thonged-down holster. That wouldn't have deterred Holy Ben Batt from giving the alarm for their arrest. He was a tough-minded man.

Something changed his mind. Perhaps it was what little he knew of Nichols' background, of what he had been in his pre-outlaw days. As a mere button, Nichols had served a hitch in the U. S. cavalry. The military training still showed in Nichols' straight-backed posture, and in the decisive way he had of moving. Nichols had risen to the rank of officer and been renowned for his bravery. Then his father had been shot in a range feud. Leaving the Army when his hitch was up, Nichols had gone on the hunt for his father's killer. The rest of the story wasn't very clear. Nichols had, apparently, put lead into the wrong man, wounding him badly. Then he had hit the owl-hoot trail. They said the Law hadn't given him any alternative, and it was well known that Nichols had never shot a man except in a face-to-face fair-shake draw.

These things Holy Ben Batt knew. And perhaps Nichols' dull thinning red hair had something to do with his decision too. Ben Batt had known another man with red hair, a man who had gone "bad" as they said. Batt opened the brief letter and read it quickly. Signed also by the governor, it requested that any officer of the law to whom it was presented would cooperate to the fullest extent with the bearer, one Michael Nichols. Michael Nichols, it concluded, was engaged in a mission that had his heartiest support though he was un-

able to give it official public backing.

Batt dropped the letter on a table, then noticed that the seal on it had been unbroken till he opened it. "You've shown this to no other officer of the law?" he said.

Unhurriedly Red Nichols unbuckled the gunbelt over his flat body, then let belt and holsters and guns thump to the floor. "You're the first one I'd trust, Judge Batt."

HOLY Ben Batt neither smiled nor nodded, giving no sign at the compliment. He went over to a shelf and got a bottle of whisky and some glasses. Put them on the table and motioned Nichols and his friends to help themselves. Batt himself never touched liquor. He was a rigid inflexible man, with few close warm friends, but respected up and down the country. There were some who said he was too harsh, but nobody had ever questioned his personal courage or sense of justice. He was the man who had brought law and order to Maverick.

Years back, Maverick had been a rip-roaring hell town, a roost for the saddle tramps and lobos. It's boast was that it had the fastest-growing Boothill west of the Mississippi. Things had come to a head when two of the biggest lawless factions had staged a feud. Blood had literally run in the gutters and half the town had been burned down. And then young Ben Batt had stepped in with a handful of the small ranchers behind him to take over things from the crooked Vigilantes. Every last gun-slick and wanted man, together with their riffraff hangers-on, were either driven out or buried there. Fearless dogged Holy Ben Batt had smoked it out with three of the toughest gun-aces of the Southwest at that time. Batt had been made the first town marshal.

Within a few years after the clean-up, a bitter range war had broken out between the Bearpaw Pool and two of the other main ranchers. Gunmen had been imported, cattle rustled and fences cut. Butt had calmly gone into action, arrested the owners of the spreads themselves, put them on trial and sat as judge himself. And despite the offer of fat bribes and the threats of force, he had handed them sentences of one year apiece in the local jail and impounded their bank accounts to guarantee against their escape. There had been a protest that he was making up the laws as he went along.

"Somebody's got to make 'em," had been his blunt harsh reply, "I'll do it and I'll back 'em up. Call it home-made justice, but it *is* justice—and it's going to be hell on anybody running against it!"

The range feud had been broken. The three owners had served their time and come out quite pacified with no further ideas of embroiling the Maverick cow country. One, in fact, had posted a two thousand dollar reward personally a few months later when some tinhorn had shot Batt from an alley. Ben Batt had lay at death's door for some weeks. When he recovered, the governor had made him a special judge in what was known as the Maverick Territory. Over the years, he had ruled it with an unflinching iron hand. Now, a small flat-faced man with stiff iron-gray hair that reflected his whole personality, he sat rigidly in a chair, waiting for Red Nichols to tell his story. Batt exuded neither sympathy nor hostility. As Nichols measured stares with him, the one-time outlaw realized that after you faced Batt a couple of minutes, you forgot his size. He had a certain dynamic quality that made him seem big.

"JUDGE, I showed it to you because I got a hunch I'm going to be around these parts for quite a spell. I—"

"How'd you get that governor's pardon?" Batt clipped in.

"There was a fire up at the State prison. I—I guess I could have gotten away. But—well there were some boys caught inside so. . ." He had rescued more than a dozen men, including two injured guards.

"Why keep the pardon a secret then?" demanded Batt.

"Because I wanted it that way. I'm

after a man, judge. . ." The flinty eyes slivered in thought a moment. "I can work better if nobody knows I'm out of prison and thinks I'm still an outlaw. You see, the man I'm after is an outlaw."

Batt's eyebrows climbed questioningly. He said nothing.

"He's an outlaw the Law has failed to bring in, Batt. He is Deaf John Dean."

"You're after one of your own kind, Nichols?"

Red Nichols' hands clawed on his thighs. One of the men with him half leaped to his feet, convinced Nichols was going into action. And Nichols' voice was ragged with pent-up emotion when he answered.

"I could kill a man easy for calling me one of Dean's kind, Batt. . . Don't forget it, please."

Batt was about to bark an answer when the hoofs of a hard-driven horse came up the road from town. The judge moved quickly to a window. He was thinking of that Gregg down in the jailhouse and his case that would be coming to trial soon. Feeling was running high on the case. From straws in the wind, he sensed there was going to be trouble over what should be a cut-and-dried trial. Certain parties, he knew, seemed dead set on getting the unknown run-of-the-mill gunslinger off. Perhaps this was some new report.

But the horseman went galloping on past, waving to the special deputy out front. Batt moved back to his chair, curtly gesturing them to refill their glasses. Nichols ignored the invitation.

"Why are you after Dean, Nichols?"

The one-time cavalry officer and outlaw said, "Because I hate him as an enemy of mankind. Don't mean to sound like a preacher, but that is what Dean is. There's nothing lower, and when a man turns on his own kind—" A vein bulged in Nichols' forehead. "Dean double-crossed other outlaws. He—"

"An owlhoot feud, eh? That don't interest me as a lawman, Nichols! I—"

"If being a lawman means you're interested in justice, it should, by Gawd! You should want John Dean run down anyway. He tipped the Law off to where Charlie Belcher was hiding out—then split the reward with the badge-packer who took him in."

"Hmmmm. . .Well, Belcher was captured, anyway."

"There was Kid Wentworth. He led Wentworth into a lawman's trap. He did it because he knew where the Kid had cached the bullion he got when he stopped the Limited at Lincoln. That's why the Law never found the stolen bullion, Batt!"

Batt's jaw dropped. It *was* the job of the Law to recover stolen loot whenever possible.

Nichols went on, husky-voiced as he sought to keep his personal vindictiveness penned in. "I knew the Kid. He went bad when the bank back in his home town foreclosed on his widowed mother's ranch. The Kid was dang decent. . . Then there was Ab Bussy. Bussy was just a lazy cuss who did a little small-time rustling once in a while. Small-bore gent, but he was grabbed just outside of Maverick here—and died here, too."

"He was shot while trying to escape," said Batt sternly. He was wanted for the Stapleton Bank robbery. The word had gone out so—"

"And he never did the Stapleton job. But Dean knew there was a fat reward for anybody who turned over the man who did do it. He was going to get his share of that. So he turned up Bussy after planting some false evidence. Turned him up just like you'd send a steer to the slaughter pen. I know Bussy wasn't at Stapleton because I know who *did* bust open that bank."

BATT opened his jaws to speak but changed his mind. There was conviction in Nichols' voice. You couldn't doubt the sound of it or the direct penetrating stare of the bitter eyes.

"I could hang up my guns and go off free, Batt," he added, voice strained down to almost a whisper. "But I'm risking my life going after Dean. *Sabe?*"

"All right. . . And you think he's in these parts?"

"I know he was, and I have reason to think he hasn't left his hideout, wherever it is near here."

"And you want me to help you find him, eh? Well—" His thoughts went again to that man down in the jailhouse, that Gregg.

"Asking no help yet," said Nichols curtly. "All I'm asking is that there be no interference with me—or my pards. And that if we're picked up as outlaws—well, now you know that we aren't."

"Yes, yes. Uh—how is it you're so plumb sure he's still hanging out nigh here—if that Dean ever did come this way, Nichols?"

"Because Dean was in touch with his brother lately. And the brother headed this way. He got as far as Iron Hill. . . The brother's name is Randall, Dean's real family name," he added.

"All right, all right. Pick him up. We can even lock him up on some kind of a charge till he talks and—"

"Randall's talking days are over. He was shot last night over to Iron Hill—shot as John Dean himself. But it wasn't Dean, I know. And one of the men I'm plumb certain put out Randall's light I've seen before around Maverick here. I'll know him when I clap eyes on him again."

"Why in tarnation would anybody want to kill this Randall, Nichols?" Inside, Batt was thinking how escape-proof the jail was.

Red Nichols' mouth jerked with impatience. "That ain't the important thing, Batt. The important thing is why did his killers want him to be taken for Deaf John Dean himself? . . . The answer is because they know where John Dean is and want to protect him. If he's officially dead—you see?"

Briefly he told the judge about trailing one of the killers to the crossroads place outside of Iron Hill. And of the gunfight there.

"Seems to me you should uh been able to grab him off," Batt sneered. "Three of you, jumping him in the dark and—"

Nichols' lips thinned. "Another jasper drew chips. He was—the Silver Kid, that fella Strant!" He dropped his eyes to the bandanna-wrapped right hand that bore the Kid's gun sign.

CHAPTER VI

IT WAS going to storm. Big lowering thunderheads were stacked up to the northwest of the valley in which Maverick lay. The air was heavy with dampness, with the haze blurring the steeple of the church just back from Maverick's main street. Thunder rumbled like the belch of a giant up the valley. Down before the marshal's office and the yellowish blockhouse of the dobie jail beside the creek, a cowhand fought to steady the nervous team of a buckboard. Solo Strant and Sam Sabin stood on the big gallery of the Maverick Hotel. It was late in the afternoon. They had come into town a little earlier after having stopped off at Sabin's Slash-S en route in from Iron Hill. Mount, the deputy marshal, had left them before when they turned off to the ranch. It was considered wiser for him not to be seen returning with Sabin. After all, Mount represented the Law that was supposed to prosecute Henry Gregg.

"Going to storm," the stocky Sabin mentioned. He eyed the rugged block of the jail. If they could only snake Dean out of there now, things would be greatly simplified. But it was out of the question. For one thing, it was one tough jail. On top of that, some of those gents of Batt's Law and Order Committee were always around the marshal's office in front of the jail building. And that connected with the only gate in the wall of the jail yard by a stone-walled passage.

More than that, Dean himself didn't want escape. He claimed his wounded leg was still bad; he was weak and thinned by the loss of blood. And Dean was a smart one, Sam Sabin had to admit. He wasn't going to have to run like a hunted animal and hole up somewhere. Not yet, anyway. Dean wanted to be cleared as Henry Gregg so he could walk out a free, unwanted gent. From his point of

view, it was up to Sabin and Mount and Lobart to get him off or go down with him. Sabin cursed softly.

"What?" said the Kid beside him.

"Nothing, nothing," muttered Sabin. But he knew his nerves were getting ragged. That red-faced, gaunt gent trying to bust a cap on him back outside Iron Hill hadn't helped either. He supposed it was just a hold-up attempt. They had seen him flashing that roll of bills in Iron Hill and followed him to make a second attempt after the first one, behind the bar where he had killed Randall, had failed. Still, there was something about the affair at the crossroads place. . .

ACROSS the road of the big sprawling town, the man in the hickory shirt inclined his head slightly and moved on along the plank walk. Another man stepped out of the driveway of the livery barn beside the hotel, whistling sharply above the clatter of wagons in the street. He moved on. Sabin mopped sweat from his forehead. The stage was set, he knew.

"Got a little business to look into, Strant. Suppose you mosey about town and I'll meet you back here in an hour. . . By the way, I wish I could offer you a real chunk of dinero to sit in on our side but—well, my assets are pretty well tied up now what with bringing in that St. Louis lawyer and all."

"I pay for my own cartridges," said the sleepy-eyed Kid succinctly in the soft voice. Meaning, his guns weren't for hire. But Sabin's remark impressed him, as it was meant to do. Sam Sabin knew you never could buy this Kid; that was why he hadn't tried.

Sabin went west down the street and was swallowed in the throng. The Kid, after building a quirly, moved off in the other direction. He was trying to put things together in his mind. First off, he didn't like that Washita Mount worth two hoots. And somehow it wasn't quite right that Mount, as an officer of the Law, should be working undercover against it. If he really believed the Law was in the wrong here, he should resign and then try to clear the innocent man. Out at the Slash-S, he had had a look at Sabin's bunkhouse spread. More than a few of them had the gunman stripe plain on them.

"Yep, I got a few special trigger slammers in the deck," Sabin had come out with disarmingly candidness. "After all, I've been warned, and attempts have been made on me."

That was one of the convincing factors to Solo. He had seen those gunmen close in on Sabin back there outside Iron Hill. Figuring to pick up some of the gossip in the town on the case, he turned in at the Lost Doggie Bar. The thunder had grown louder and premature dusk was lowering over the town. It struck him of a sudden that for a man in danger, Sam Sabin had been right careless about walking off alone.

THREE men on his left at the bar were talking about the case. "Well, we'll soon find out," one of them said. "Heard the doc say that Gene Hawker is getting better fast. He said he'll be able to go into court and testify in a matter of days."

"Sam Sabin's going to fight it to the bitter end," another prophesied. "He seems convinced that Gregg fella is innocent. Wonder why he's so interested?"

"Don't see how there is much he can do. Joe, fill 'em up again. You think we're camels that can go nine days without a drink, huh?"

Joe, the drink wrangler, said in a minute as he clambered on a chair to light one of the lamps. A fourth man joined the trio.

"Heard the news, gents? They say Sabin has got Strant, that Silver Kid fella, to back his side. Yep! Some fellas have seen him in town. The word is this Strant is out to break the case." The newcomer had failed to recognize the Kid's well-known rig in the dimness.

Solo's eyes swivelled as he saw in the bar mirror a man approaching purposefully from the rear. This gent had no trouble in singling out the

Kid. Halting just behind him, he spoke in a quick whisper.

"Some trouble threatening, Strant. Sabin wants to see you out in back pronto."

He led the way to the rear, into a smaller room, then flung open a door quickly. It gave onto a hall running to the rear. "Go ahead, Kid. I'll make sure you aren't followed." Solo took a few strides and was at the back door that was ajar. Habit made him drop a hand to one of his silver-stocked Colts as he stepped outside.

Shots slapped into a packing crate a few feet from the door. Then came the cough of the gun from the rear corner of the building. The Kid slanted up a Colts just as lead from a second angle hammered into the back wall of the barroom beside him. Snapping a shot at gunsmoke floating over a hummock, the Kid tried to duck back through the door. It was shut and barred behind him.

The first splashing drops of the rain slapped into the sand around. Somebody bawled, "Git that danged Sabin man, boys! Burn him down!" More slugs smacked around the Kid who had darted away from the door.

He was headed for the corner whence the first hogleg had spoken. His boots snarled in a piece of loose wire and he went to his knees. He fully expected the numbing impact of lead into his flesh then. It didn't come. Both guns out and cocked, he came to the corner. The man there had gone.

But then bullets churned out of the dimness of the narrow alley beneath the overhanging eaves. He dragged his tail out of there pronto, dodging into some scrawny cottonwoods stretching down from the place next door to the barroom. He fully realized now that he had sprung a gun-trap.

SOMEBODY stuck their head out of a second-story window. A bullet broke the pane over them and the head was jerked back from sight. More lead kicked sand behind the Kid. Crouched in some grass, he sought a target. A gun blinked viciously from the end of that hummock, and another spoke at the corner of a shed. The Kid saw nobody. As he ducked, a third weapon chimed in from a fresh angle, over on the Kid's right. He picked up his boots and travelled through the thickening gloom down along the stretch of trees before they had a chance to get him ringed in.

"Blast the Sabin coyote!" came the cry of a hidden gent. It certainly looked, as Sam Sabin had foretold, that Solo Strant would be marked because he had aided him.

The Kid triggered at a segment of sombrero that popped into sight over by the shed. Then the Kid reached a ragged tree-flanked lane that paralleled the main road out front. His appearance was like pulling a string. Two riders swung into view around a bend of the lane. And they were stiff-legged in the stirrups and riding the triggers as they came into sight.

Dropping behind a boulder, the Kid drew bead. Both riders were wheeling to bolt back around the bend. One screamed as a slug got him in the leg. Solo hustled down the lane in the other direction, constantly compelled to be on guard against being surrounded. "Whoever planned this ambush sure doesn't believe in two-bit jobs," he said with that cold humor he possessed in even the tightest spots. But he felt like an actor in a play in which everybody but himself had rehearsed. Those others seemed to know what his next move would be.

The rain beat in his face as he ran. A man running across at a tangent on the other side of the flanking trees fired. Solo realized the mounted men would overtake him shortly. When he came to a path through high ragged grass running to the back door of a place on the main street, he dived into it, going flat in the slippery underfooting. Twisting around, he fired from his knees as a man afoot poked into sight through the trees, his white calfskin vest gleaming with water. The hombre sighted the Kid and leaped back for cover.

But the bullet caught him just

above his gun hand. He clawed at his shirt sleeve, locked in his tracks a moment before he vanished cursing. Solo Strant went on down the curving path. Expecting bitter pursuit now, he twisted for a backward glance. When he looked forward again, a figure was emerging on the rear loading platform of a feed store. It was the angular red-faced jasper with whom he had tangled at the crossroads place, Nichols.

RED NICHOLS' gun, in his left hand, lashed a crimson tongue from its muzzle twice. The Kid felt the slug that seared the calf of his leg. The other bullet smashed off a boulder behind his half-turned body. He was dimly aware of a brief stinging sensation at the back of his neck against the spine. Then he was too busy rising after his hit leg had, momentarily paralyzed, collapsed under him. As Nichols dropped off the platform and advanced, the Kid staggered in the wet underfooting. For some strange reason he couldn't savvy, he was dizzy and the scene swam before his eyes.

He turned to go back up the path, careening on his hurt leg. Then he realized those others—the red-faced one's pard, he figured—would be coming down it. In the dimness beneath a clump of aspen, he turned into the grass quickly. A few yards back, he crouched a moment to try to steady his senses. Saw some of his pursuers step into the head of the path. It looked as if the Kid's number was up. Mouth grim, he was already thumbing fresh shells into his hot guns. Actually the fact the main bunch hadn't drilled him yet seemed little less than miraculous.

Then there was the fresh crash of gunfire. It came from the other end of the path where Nichols was. One of the men up at the end by the lane stumbled, clutching at his head. The others began to return Nichols' fire. The Kid pushed up his head to take in the situation. He could scarcely believe his eyes. What he couldn't know was that Red Nichols had never meant to kill him, that he had a reason for taking Solo Strant alive. After all, now Nichols tied Solo in with the man who had killed Randall back in Iron Hill.

Thanking his stars for the break, the Kid dragged himself off.

CHAPTER VII

VERY shortly, the firing behind him broke off. He was able to rise and hobble along on his hit leg now. The wound was only a shallow flesh one, not serious. But his senses were still blurred; he felt like a figure moving through one of those slow, hazy dreams with his limbs hampered by some kind of invisible coils. When he looked back again, over the top of the grass in the thickening gloom, he saw Nichols wading through in his direction. The latter had turned to wave on some others. They were his saddle pards, outlaws, not the ones who had come down the path after the Kid.

Solo Strant hated to eat crow before any man, but he was not a danged idiot by a long shot. He knew he had as much chance of defending himself as a blind-drunk hombre. Nothing focused clearly even close at hand before his eyes. There was a peculiar prickling sensation at the back of his neck. There didn't seem to be any logical connection, but he knew it was time to bust the breeze.

He made out the white side of the hotel through an opening between two buildings on a side street ahead. By an effort of his mind, he recalled he had left his pony at a hitch rail on that side street when he had arrived in town with Sabin. He moved ahead for what seemed an endless time and stumbled through a puddle in the side street and fumbled at the saddle horn of his paint pony. Somebody called through the rain. As he wheeled away from the rail, he saw Nichols emerge from between the two buildings. Then a gust of wind threw a solid sheet of rain between them, and the Kid spurred up the road toward the outskirts of Maverick. Vaguely he realized he was heading for Sabin's Slash-S. . .

THE rain had ceased some hours later when he became aware of his surroundings like a man awaking from sleep in a strange place. He was out on the open range, moving beside a range fence on a muddy track. It was not the road he had come in on from the Slash-S with Sabin. It took him some minutes to comprehend that. Then it came back to him that he had been chased. Like something out of the distant past, he remembered having the red-faced gent and two others on his trail. And how he had finally doubled back on them in the heavy downpour beyond the town, hidden in a fire-gutted old barn, and finally struck out across the open range for the Slash-S.

He tried to jerk himself out of the dreamlike stage he was in, to alert himself. His limbs, especially his arms, were very heavy. Laboriously he figured when he came to the next habitation he would inquire the way to Sabin's place. Then he lapsed off again. He knew that when once more he seemed to wake up.

There was a relentless dull pounding at the base of his skull as if a steel-tipped finger kept prodding there. In some moments, everything would be clear as ice-cold creek water. Then the night would close in around him, its black reaches seeming to penetrate his very skin and becloud his brain. He would fight against the inkiness like a battling swimmer, get his head above the surface. Things would be crystal bright again. He would know that he was convinced now of a plot to railroad the man, Gregg, in jail as Sabin had sworn. The fact that the same red-faced one who had tried to get Sabin outside of Iron Hill had thrown down on him was the clincher. Then the facts would fade into a distorted dim pattern. Once he found the reins had slipped from his hands. It was only after a lot of fumbling and straining that he was able to retrieve them.

SHORTLY afterward he thought the moon must be rising. When the pony brought him atop a low rise, he saw the red ball in the east and knew it was the sun and a new day. He almost slipped from the saddle. Hauling himself erect in it he saw a patch of dull stagnant water to one side of the trail. Then he noticed more on the other side of the pony. Gradually he became aware the paint horse was picking its way along a narrow winding path in a swamp. It was dim again aside from spots where daylight pierced the heavy overhanging foliage.

Solo made out great trees rising from clawlike roots out of the water. Garlands of moss bearded massive overhanging boughs. A bird went by, its wings flapping almost in the Kid's face. Mossy hummocks and bunches of reeds dotted the unmoving fetid waters. At times there were patches of oily-surfaced quicksand. Vaguely he realized a misstep by the pony would be the end of them both. Once or twice he thought he caught a dim light ahead.

It was a heavy jolt that roused him from his next spell of lethargy. He had fallen; he was on all fours on damp earth like an animal. It was an island in the swamp. Grasping a stirrup, he got to his feet but was unable to clamber back into the saddle. Drowsiness like a drug seemed to clog his veins. He pushed on through lush undergrowth and the foliage of the low-slung limbs of trees. This dim green world itself was unreal now.

He was down again. To even make the effort to rise was too much. The iron-nerved Kid was baffled at how his will power seemed to have dissolved. He lay there with his head on the damp cool earth. Voices came to him. He thought they were part of the crazy dreams he dropped off into. Then something familiar about one of the voices penetrated his mind. He found himself listening to it.

"I swear to you I'm doing all I can to save John Dean," the voice said. "Everything. . . They'll never find out who he is now. He. . ."

A woman's voice broke in. The Kid sensed this was no part of a dream now. Then the other voice that he

felt he should know came back. It came from inside some house and carried faintly. If it hadn't been for the tomb-like stillness of the swamp, Solo would never have been able to catch the words.

The other voice had a quick way of speaking. It said, "Jane, we just can't up and grab Deaf John out of that jail. You can see that! We'll beat the case at that trial. You can depend on the Big Man and me. . . Jane, you're a mighty handsome woman, I don't mind saying. Have you ever thought how much future there is for you as the woman of an outlaw—even a big potato like Dean?"

THE KID caught a woman's light coquettish laughter drifting on the air. Then another voice, sharp and raspy, entered the conversation. A door scraped open. Goodbyes were said. Solo was aware of the drum of hoofs passing not far away. They seemed to blend with the tapping at the base of his skull.

Whisky burned his throat and then somebody was mopping his face with a cloth wetted with icy water. He tried to push them away; waking up was too much effort. The harsh voice like scraping metal, heard before, spoke close to his ear, commanding him to waken.

"We want to know your name before we bury you, stranger. We're devilishly curious that way," the voice said with cold-blooded mockery. "Not that we really care a tinker's damn whether you live or die actually! No."

The Kid levered up his hot eyelids and looked up into a sneering cynical face that matched the voice. It was pale and lumpy, a face habitually composed in a smirk. But the thin pursed lips gave the lie to any underlying good humor. And the oversized red-veined eyes were globes of cold contempt for the human race in general.

"Well," said the man. And his exhaled breath, despite the earliness of the hour, was freighted with whisky fumes. "Bandaged up that fool bloody leg of yours, stranger. What else is wrong with you—or is it just plain drunkenness?"

The Kid tried to speak but his tongue was a thick block in his mouth. He saw that he was in a sitting room in a small house. That there were freshly-laundered calico curtains at the windows. More whisky trickled down his throat and a girl was bent over him, holding a tin cup to his face. She had light blue eyes, long and with heavy black lashes, in a face white as alabastre.

"You mumbled something about your head," she said gently. He was to learn Rosalia South always spoke that way.

He gestured toward the back of his neck. Moving his hand and forearm was like lifting a tremendous sledge hammer.

"What? Here, let me see!" The man with the bloodless face, her father, bent over the Kid again. "I examined his head. Couldn't see anything wrong with the fool." He wasn't very gentle as he rolled Solo onto his side on the old horsehair sofa.

Solo exerted himself to move his arm again and get it around to the back of his neck. That dull pounding had gone. It was the same spot where he had had the pricklish feeling after Nichols had shot at him. He felt the man jerking down his shirt collar in back. There was a tuneless whistle. Solo felt him probing there, saw him go to a cupboard on the wall and come back with a medical instrument. There was more probing but it wasn't very painful. When South asked him if it hurt much, the Kid managed to whisper no.

"BAD, very bad. . . Local shock condition there." And now the sneer was gone from the man's voice. It was impersonal but alive with interest. He probed more deeply. A word to his daughter and she brought a scalpel from the wall cabinet. The Kid's teeth met with a click as that explored the flesh. He heard the man tell his daughter to get water boiling on the stove.

"You weren't shot there—exactly,"

South said after the Kid had been turned back flat. "But some jagged pieces of lead penetrated the flesh." He launched into a series of medical terms that were meaningless to any layman. He stared off at the blank wall as he spoke. A subtle change had come over him. A mask seemed to have fallen over the inhumanness of his face. "In plain language, my friend, some of the leaden particles, as well as I am able to determine, have lodged against the spinal cord and even between the vertebrae of the spine itself." He paused and reached with the negligent gesture of habit for the open whisky bottle on the table. Then he looked at it and dropped his hand. Globules of sweat were like drops of rain on his seamed forehead.

The Kid remembered that shot of Nichols' that had spattered off the boulder in the grass behind him. That would account for it.

"The condition," he went on, "is causing abnormal pressure on certain motor nerves in the spinal column affecting the—umm-m—brain and causing a partial paralysis of your arms. Umm-m."

He filled the tin cup with whisky, then added something from a small dark bottle taken from the cupboard. The Kid started to sip as South held him propped half up. The man dumped the contents into his face so the Kid half choked but gulped it down.

"A drug unknown here. . .came across it down in South America. The native Indians use it. . . Umm-m."

"Well, what in blazes can be done?" the Kid husked.

"It means an operation that has never been performed. . . I shall perform it. . ." South shrugged. . .

IT WAS dawn of the next day. The Kid was sitting up in the cot in a small dingy bedroom in the back of the little house. South sat in a creaking rocker a few feet away, the whisky bottle on the floor beside him. He said it again, "You are lucky to be alive and able to move," and nodded sleepily. His face was a cynically disinterested lump of flesh again.

Venom for the man boiled in the Kid's blood for minutes. South's disinterest was maddening in the face of what had happened to him. For he could only move his arms slowly. And though the hands functioned, the arms themselves were virtually almost devoid of power. They were like heavy wooden appendages that did not belong to him.

He couldn't have drawn effectively enough to save his life against the worst broken-down gun-toter he had ever seen.

CHAPTER VIII

SOUTH'S voice went on in the mocking drone. But now the Kid sensed the mockery was as much for South himself as anybody else. South said he had once been a doctor, a surgeon. He mentioned study abroad the way a man out in that part of the country would have told he'd been in town for the mail.

"Yes. . . A surgeon, once. . . Now, a rotting chunk of flesh in the last stages of desuetude. There was a time—umm-m—when I thought I was meant to be a great surgeon, when—But all that is dead. I operated when I was drunk once—back in the East. The patient failed to survive." The bloodless lips wrenched and he picked up the bottle and took a slug.

"So, I am what I am today, an outcast, a pariah hiding out away from men—a dirty drunken derelict!" He leaped to his feet a moment, then sank back into the chair. "I told you what had happened to you, Mister. I removed the bullet fragments. I don't think the spinal column is permanently injured. In a day or two—umm-m—your arms will get a little stronger. Beyond that. . ."

"I reckon I owe you a heap of thanks," the Kid said. "I don't know how I can repay you but. . ." South made an impatient gesture, hoisting the bottle to his face again. Solo realized how lucky, in a way, he had been in stumbling into this place. No ordinary sawbones would have been of much help, probably even unable to diagnose the trouble. It was

plain that this Dr. South had been a brilliant man once. The Kid knew just enough about medicine to understand what an incredible operation the man had performed.

South's mind returned to the scene. "As I said before, pressure was exerted on certain upper vertebrae of the spine. Nerves in the spinal column were —well—umm-m—were pinched. The nerves affecting control of your arms are still suffering the effects." The old sneering look came back to his face. He cursed thinly. "Hell, I've done all I can!"

"Thanks," the Kid repeated. "But my arms, I can only move them slowly."

"They will get stronger in a couple of days."

The Kid went rigid against the pillows, cold sweat meandering down his bare chest. "But I can't move them quickly. There are times in my life when it is necessary—"

SOUTH Cocked a white eyebrow. "Yes, I guessed you were a man whose business was with the gun. . . . It is a question of when the motor nerves recover from the damage. It might be a matter of a week—many weeks—or, never." He rose unsteadily, spilling some of the contents of the whisky bottle on the front of his ragged spotted black coat. "If you care to consult another medical authority, dammit, do so and see if I care or—"

Rosalia South entered the room. She smiled at the Kid. "Well, the patient is looking much better. And hungry too, I imagine."

For the first time the Kid saw she was of medium height, very buxom, with flowing untamed hair the color of uncut wheat in the sun. It was striking against her creamy skin. To accentuate the latter she wore a black blouse. She saw his gaze running over her and smiled with pleasure. When she came closer, his nostrils caught the scent of the heavy perfume she used. It was strange on a girl living like a hermit in this tumble-down house out in a swamp.

He ate and then slept some more. When he woke the second time, most of the stiffness had left the back of his neck. He ate again, then tried to fashion himself a tube of Durham. When he spilled the makin's in impatience at the slowness of his once lightning-fast fingers, the girl laughed softly. She took the sack of Bull from him and expertly rolled him a smoke. The Kid drew on it hard, remembering his almost useless arms again.

It was a bad blow, being practically crippled in the prime of his life. South had said, of course, that the full use of his arms might return. But that "might" was a big word, terrifying in its indefiniteness. He had a score to settle with that red-faced hombre. He knew now he was drawing chips in this game in Maverick. But with his ability to sling his hoglegs gone—

"How did you get here, Mr. Strant?" the girl asked in the gentle caressing voice. She leaned over to push his matted black hair back off his forehead. She laughed at the surprise on his face at the gesture.

He might have told her all about what had happened. This girl living out in the midst of a swamp with a broken irascible father could have no stake in the Maverick game. But the laugh was like an echo. He had heard it when he lay in the brush out beyond the house. When he heard the man's voice talk of Deaf John Dean. It put him on guard.

"Pony just carried me in," he said.

"Well, how did you get shot? Who shot you?" Her smile was friendly and warm.

THE KID shook his head. He was trying to recall the conversation he had overhead. One thing he did remember. Whoever had been speaking had spoken as if Deaf John Dean still lived. That didn't make sense.

"Everything is very vague to me, ma'm," the Kid said, trying not to sound impolite or suspicious. After all, these people had helped him. "I'm not an outlaw, don't worry. But how it happened—" He shook his head.

Her eyes drifted to the Kid's clothes folded over a chair. "Oh, some outlaws are very nice. I—I've met some." Then she quickly added she would make him some fresh coffee.

They talked some more the next day. Solo Strant felt a great deal better. There was a slight soreness around the incision in the back of his neck but no real pain. He was able to get up and move around some. And his arms were stronger. But he could only move them cumbersomely, slowly, the hands fumbling. They sat out on the veranda. The doctor appeared once, a whisky bottle in his hand. He snorted, turned away, then came back to examine the bandaging at the Kid's neck. He went away after that, walking down a path into a swamp. When the Kid tried to draw her out about her father, Rosalia only smiled enigmatically.

"You do not have to feel sorry for me, Mr. Strant. No." She hummed lightly. The weak sunlight in the swamp flashed off something on her hand. The Kid noticed the broad-banded ring of gold there. Engraved along it was a design, a wriggling snake with head uplifted to strike. It was strange. "Where do you go when you leave here? Oh, please—do not think we want to get rid of you!"

Wary again, Solo shrugged and said he didn't know—and he wasn't certain. It brought back sharply the condition of his once great gun hands and what it meant in his life. If he tangled with some gun-slick after his scalp, he would be like a fish-in-the-barrel target for the man. The wise thing would be to quit the country and wait till he saw how his arms reacted. There was a grim alternative. That was to stick—and bluff it!

His stay at Dr. South's house in the swamp was cut short abruptly. Solo and Rosalia were eating dinner alone. It was still daylight and the girl said her father often remained out in the swamp for hours. South rushed in and announced the Kid had to get out at once.

"You've been here long enough anyway," he snapped brusquely. "Are you aiming to board on us forever?" At the girl's protesting cry, he got a grip on himself. "No, no, Strant. Keep your money, please. Money means nothing to me anyway. I—I—well, we aren't supposed to have anybody here. And somebody is coming in." He had seen a rider, a rider he knew, approaching for his lookout on a knoll in the fastnesses of the swamp.

SOUTH only called gruffly from a back room when the Kid reentered the house to thank him after having saddled up his paint horse. The girl went out with him and ordered him to follow her with the horse. They cut off the path leading down the slope of the little island. The early dusk in the swamp fell swiftly. They moved into a grove of trees cutting off all view of both the house and the path. Then they waited.

The Kid could feel the woman close to him. She said, "Do you have a girl some place, Mr. Strant?"

He smiled. "Never squat in one place very long, Miss. Reckon I don't have much time for the fair sex."

"Or perhaps you haven't met the right one." She chuckled softly, even closer to him. When he started to thank her for what they had done for him, she laid a finger across his lips. The finger pressed deeper quickly when the sounds of a horse came from over on the path.

It went on by them. She spoke again. "Please, promise you won't slip back to try to find out who came. It might be dangerous for you, anyway. . . . Thank you. . . . And some day you might pay us another visit?" It was half a question, coquettish. Then her lips brushed his cheek and her heard her giggling as she stepped away. She led him out of the grove another way, pointed down an avenue beneath the heavy foliage and told him it would take him on to the path out. Then she was swallowed like a wraith in the dusk of the island.

He swung into the saddle and let his pony pick his way along the angling path across the evil-looking dead waters.

Back at the cabin, Washita Mount dropped from the saddle and stepped onto the porch to shake hands with Dr. South. Mount had brought a message from Deaf John Dean in jail, a message for Rosalia. . . .

CHAPTER IX

BIG MAN LOBART had a blanket around his thick-fleshed shoulders, over his pearl-gray suit. In the lamplight, he looked like some big Indian sachem. He kept cursing about the cold gusts that blew through the room.

"For the lovva Pete, Sam," he growled at Sabin, "can't you afford a better ranch-house than this old drafty trap?"

Short Sabin walked away from the open door to the dining room behind "After that little Jacinta Valley matter, I figured it was plumb horse sense not to look too danged prosperous. After all, I live in this part uh the country." He kept his voice down. Back in the dining room, Jackson Bartlett the St. Louis lawyer was having a late supper. Lobart had met him up at the end of the railroad and just brought him out.

Lobart grunted something, eyelids that were fat pouches shuttering down to cut off his glassy stare a moment. His jowled face was saddle-colored and a shapeless conglomeration of flesh matching his body. He simply overflowed the leather chair in which he sat. Selfishness was stamped plain on that face that he could turn into a cordial well-wishing mask.

"This is going to cost a heap of dinero before we're finished, I'm afraid," he said. "I'd like to snake that Dean outa that jail and break him in half with my own hands. 'D be simpler."

The remark didn't sound as ridiculous as it looked. Lobart looked soft and shambling, but he had done some killing in his day. He could still slap out a gun with any man when he had to. And in the past—a past when he was a barkeep in a tough Border honky tonk, he had killed two gents with his bare hands.

"The man to silence that way would be Gene Hawker—if we could." They had been through that some time ago. It was out of the question. It wasn't as if Hawker, brother of the dead hoeman, could be gunned down apparently in some accidental gun fracas. At his own request, he was living in the jailhouse during his convalescence.

"WHY TALK uh what can't be done, Sam?" he brushed a cigar ash that had fallen on his flowing bow tie beneath his three chins. He picked up a water tumbler of whisky and took half of it, washing it around in his capacious mouth and swallowing it unhurriedly. They said Lobart drank redeye like water, and that it had as much effect on him. "Now about this Silver Kid, Sam. . . . Hells bells, that jasper is purer 'n a Bible-pounding circuit rider! And slicker than slobbers, in the bargain. How're you going to guarantee he'll side with us and—"

"I tried to tell you before. He should uh drifted in before now, but he'll show up." Sabin moved further away from the dining room door. "Down in Maverick, I staged a little act on the Kid. I sent some of those gunmen up against him—some of the boys you sent in. . . ."

He told Lobart about how the gunslicks had jumped the Kid out behind that barroom, the Lost Doggie. How it was made to look like a trap with the men yelling to "Get that Sabin man."

"Somebody else did join in on that Strant's side," Sabin finished. "So they tell me. Anyway, Strant escaped with his hide—just as I planned it. The men had orders not to hit him. He hit a couple of them though."

"That's going to cost more dinero to salve their wounds. . . . But it was a slick trick, Sam. He can be valuable to us, especially at the trial.

He'll have an effect on public opinion."

"That was one of the things I figured on, Big Man. I—"

There was a gentle clearing of throat behind them. Little big-headed Bartlett the lawyer had stepped in from the dining room. He smiled catlike as he manipulated a golden toothpick around his oversized teeth. He was a small man, gotten up like a dude, with yellow hair plastered across his white skull. That skull made him look like a swollen toadstool on a shrivelled stem. The man's real nature was incorporated in his sly ferretlike eyes.

Sabin got drinks poured and cigars laid out. They got themselves seated around the table in the shabby living room of the ranch. Bartlett drew out a silk handkerchief to rub fastidiously at one of his cuffs that had picked up grime from the table. He had diamond links in the cuffs. His nose wrinkled with disdain.

"Please," he said in a nasal penetrating voice after nibbling at his whisky, "there is one point I would like to understand. Mr. Lobart told me about the case on the way in. But—why are you gentlemen so interested in getting this prisoner, Gregg, off? I didn't know he had any connection with you people."

SABIN had been mentally sneering at the lawyer man from St. Louis. Now his opinion changed. He had a foretaste of the way Jackson Bartlett's mind could nose in to the kernel of a matter.

Big Man Lobart said, "Shall we say this Gregg knows something? . . . Yes. Something not exactly favorable to us."

Bartlett rubbed his hands with a dry sound. "I see. So—"

"So don't try to hold me up for more dinero," Lobart interrupted. "You knew when I brought you all the way in here it wasn't to defend any two-bit thief. We're paying you like you hit a gold strike now."

Bartlett smiled vaguely as if money were the smallest consideration. "This is going to be a very difficult case to handle. Has Judge Batt set a date for the trial yet?"

Sabin nodded. The judge had stated it would be in a few more days. The chief witness, Hawker, was recovering rapidly.

"Too bad. . . . Too bad. If he hadn't, we could have filed a writ of habeas corpus, demanding immediate trial or the freedom of the prisoner. That would influence public opinion, making them think perhaps the Law was afraid to take it to trial. Too bad." He nibbled some more at his whisky.

They sat in silence save for the creaking of the old house for some moments. Bartlett ran a finger around inside his stiff stand-up collar.

"This chief witness, Hawker. . . . Has he a good standing in the community? If we can impugn his testimony. . . ."

Both Lobart and Sabin looked glum. The Hawker brothers, Sabin admitted, were well liked and respected around Maverick. They were one-time cowmen, had had a place up in Cochise County. They had lost it when they were wiped out in the big drought of seven-eight years back. When it was learned Eb had an incurable disease, Gene Hawker had picked up the hoemen's place and brought him out here to live out his final years in peace.

"Everybody felt sorry for them," Sabin concluded.

"Humph. Sounds like this Gene's a damn fool." Bartlett carved off the end of his cigar with a pen knife on the other end of his watch chain: "Sounds like the kind of a witness I can make squirm in the chair. Emotional. How was the weather the night of the alleged killing? Clear? Moonlight?"

SABIN wasn't too certain. He remembered it had been drizzling in the evening. Then it had cleared. He couldn't remember the moon.

Bartlett rose and walked across the room. The two seated across the long table from him had to twist their heads to follow him. The lawyer

turned with a gentle smile, sharp red tongue sliding across his big teeth.

"This Gregg *did* do the killing, didn't he?"

He slipped it at them so unexpectedly, so softly, they weren't on guard. They both betrayed themselves by jerks of their faces. Bartlett nodded and resumed his seat.

"You should never withhold things from your attorney, gentlemen. Getting off a guilty man is a more expensive proposition. I'd say—five thousand dollars more of expense."

Lobart's hand, beneath the shrouding blanket, slipped toward the .32 stuck beneath his vest against his belly. Big Man Lobart hated to be backed to a wall and held up. He spat tobacco leaf.

Bartlett's skinny lips peeled back from his teeth to give him a sharkish look. "I hate force—or the threat of it, Lobart." His fingernail tapped his glass with each following slow-spoken word. "That telegram I dispatched after you met me at the depot was to my partner back in St Louis. It informed him I had just met you. If, for any reason, I shouldn't return. . . ." He picked up his glass and drank with a steady hand.

Lobart surprised Sam Sabin by the broad smile that rippled across the puddle of his face. Lobart appreciated a smart man and one who could not be bluffed.

"Perhaps you do not understand the whole case, Bartlett," Lobart said. "You see, you will have a witness who has not been mentioned."

Sabin himself was surprised at that. "Who?" he blurted.

"A man named Bill Mays."

"But there was nobody else—" Sabin started.

"Of course. *We* know that. But this Bill Mays is going to give a sworn statement to a peace officer up Tenning way that he was with—uh—Gregg the night of the shooting. Mays will swear the man with Gregg, Condon, did the killing."

"How will this Mays character stand up in court?"

Lobart smiled benignly at the lawyer. "If Mays wasn't a dirty, low-down card sharp, I wouldn't have been able to get him to make the statement. He will never appear in court because he will disappear right after making the sworn statement which a man will deliver to me. . . . I have been able to pull certain strings, you see. And you will have a surprise witness, Bartlett."

The lawyer smiled toothily. "Not exactly a witness but . . ."

"So I think twenty-five hundred more should be sufficient. Eh?"

"Twenty five hundred," purred Bartlett. It had been what he had planned to settle for. He took a big gulp of his drink then, settled back, and began to fire fresh questions about the case. It was the small hours of the night when he leaned forward, collar unhooked, and stabbed a finger at them. "On cases like this, tough ones, I always like to see if there is something that can be held over the presiding judge, gents. Well?"

"I am making investigations that way," Lobart said. "Not that I can promise *anything*. But if Holy Ben Batt ever spat out of the wrong side of his mouth. . . ."

THE KID was riding for the Slash-S through the sharp wind of the range night. It was only fair, he told himself, to see Sabin and let him know what had happened. What he was going to do actually, Solo had not yet decided. The sensible thing would have been to make tracks out of there. Yet, in the long run, that too could be dangerous. That red-faced hairpin had thrown down on him twice. It was a score to be settled. If he left Maverick without a showdown, the red-faced one could spread the word that he had made the Silver Kid take a powder.

Word like that would travel around the country with the speed of a grass-fire. Would be passed up and down the owlhoot and through the roosts of gun-slicks; they would say the Silver Kid had lost his nerve. And then more than a few would be out hunting his scalp, trying their luck. They would be a big potato if

they could beat the Silver Kid. Solo had known the thing to happen before when a crack gunslinger had been beaten. Other trigger slammers closed in and hovered around like buzzards over a down cow.

There was another angle to the thing that mystified him. When, fleeing from the pack that had tried to trap him, he had run into the red-faced gent, then cut into the grass—the red-faced hombre had proceeded to duel it out with the others. That meant they had not been his men as Solo had first figured. And why Red Face had turned on gents hunting his enemy, Solo himself, the Kid could not understand. It didn't make sense.

A possibility took form in his mind. The only answer was that, for some reason, Red Face wanted to take him alive. And that same thing had come to him concerning Sam Sabin when he had seen Red Face make his play back there outside of Iron Hill. Red Face wasn't out to kill, apparently.

SOLO pushed back his battered black hat and scratched his head as he rode down to the end of the little arroyo close to the Slash-S. From the landmarks he realized he was close to Sabin's place. Coming across the range, he had gotten directions at a small outfit. He rode out past some Spanish bayonet stalks, then reined in the paint sharply. Out ahead and below at the base of a sandy bluff, four riders moved toward Sam Sabin's rancho down there in the shallow hollow. There was something furtive about the horsemen.

The next moment, they were dropping from the saddle and leading their ponies into some brush beside the trial. The Kid noted the lamplight filtering through the shades of the front room of the house. Then he saw the four, crouched and keeping to the grass, slip through the fence of the ranchyard. There was no question of it. They were raiders. Forgetting his arms powerless on the draw, he swung his pony down the bluff and along the trail but keeping behind the few trees there. Right opposite the ranchyard, he slid silently to the ground himself.

He waited a moment, having lost sight of them. They weren't on the moon-silvered porch. Then he picked them out as they went around the side of the place, dodging around an old wagon standing there. The Kid ducked across the road and slipped through the rail fence himself. Down beyond the corral, the bunkhouse was dark. One of the Kid's hands swung across his body for a holster in the cross-arm draw before he remembered. His fingers fumbled and hauled clumsily at the silver gun butt there. He couldn't jump them without practically committing suicide. The only thing was to warn Sabin before the attack started.

He went through the grass, then was forced to drop to his knees as he spotted one of them peering back around the corner of the old wagon. It was the whinny of one of their hidden horses that had alarmed them. He was forced to wait motionless for a minute or so. Then he risked advancing again. He went up the short steps to the porch. Rapped on the door. Repeated the knocking without answer. From inside the house came the roar of cursing and stomping around. It was Big Man Lobart.

The Kid turned the knob and the door, unlocked as usual in the cow country, gave to his pressure. He eased into the dark hall. A little way down it, faint light came through the draperies at the doorway to the front room.

"You can't git away with this!" came Lobart's snorting from inside. "Don't you know who I am, by grab? Lay a hand on me and when the word gets to the State capital, you'll—"

"Know who I am?" a quiet voice cut through Lobart's raving. "Red Nichols. . . . Yes, the old outlaw. And I don't give a hoot in Hell who you are, fat man! We want Sam Sabin here and we're going out with him. Make enough noise to start

trouble—and t r o u b l e you'll get. Mebbe a nice hot slug in that fat belly of yours, too."

THE KID, eyes accustoming themselves to the darkness of the interior, made out the man standing at the opening of the draperies in the doorway. His back was to Solo. The latter had a gun out in his right hand. It was all he could do to maintain the barrel level in a firing position. The nose wobbled around. He catfooted down the hall. Beyond the shoulder of the gunman between the draperies, he saw the scene.

Three men who had come through from the dining room were in there with their guns covering Sabin and the other two. They had slipped in the back way while the Kid was forced to lie low out in front. The Kid recognized the tall flat-bodied one with a Colts spiking into Sabin's side. It was Red Face. Lobart started to threaten some more.

"Aw, tie a bag over your head!" Red Face cut him off again. "Make a play and your pard here, Sabin, gits blasted! He's got a chance to live if he tells us what we want when we take him out of here!" Nichols had seen Sam Sabin in Maverick and found out who he was. Now he had come out to the ranch in a desperate gamble to capture him once again. "I don't want to kill but—"

And then the sharp voice of the man standing in the doorway to the hall came coughingly. "Nichols—Nichols. . . . Somebody h-has got—got a hogleg in m-my back!"

With his left hand, the Kid pushed back one side of the drapes to show himself as he held his unsteady, practically useless gun in the man's back. If they saw who he was, he might be able to bluff them down.

CHAPTER X

NICHOLS SAID, "Dammit Strant, have you gotta stick your nose in everywhere!"

His voice was wearily bored in the tension. It was touch and go with thumbs a-quiver on dogged-back gun hammers. And they were watching the wrong men, watching the Kid and Lobart. Sabin had a gun in his side, wasn't figured to do anything. And the lawyer, Jackson Bartlett fussed with his silk handkerchief and shook an evil little double-barrelled derringer from his cuff. It mean another gun in the game against Nichols and company.

Nichols laughed without humor. "All right, Kid. I'm no murderer—like some folks. And I'd never sacrifice one of my own men. I can wait." He spat onto the rug. "What is it?"

Solo said, "Get the hell out, Nichols! Out the front door." His voice was soft, almost velvety, a sign usually his trigger finger was proddy. But now he was glad nobody could see his gun; he had his index finger over the trigger guard in his grim effort to hold it halfway steady. He didn't dare put it over the trigger lest he fire uncontrollably.

Nichols eyed Sabin, loathe to take his gun off him. "I got your word you'll let us pass out without interference, Kid?"

"Sure, sure," snapped Lobart nervously. "Git along an'—"

Nichols paid him no heed, waiting for the Kid. Solo nodded. Nichols lowered his gun, nodded to his men, and led the way across the room. Opposite Solo Strant, Nichols paused, flinty eyes cold as death.

"Before I met up with you, Strant, I had a heap uh respect for you. Now. . . . We'll meet again."

The other two filed by. The Kid turned after the fourth one, still prodding him with his Colts out onto the porch. Down at the bunkhouse, the door was open and a couple of half-garbed men were peering out curiously as the four intruders went down the steps. Sabin lifted his arm to signal them. The Kid ordered him stop with a curse. Nichols and his mates strode out of the ranchyard and down to their ponies, mounted, and swung southward toward Maverick.

"Why in blazes didn't you drill 'em

when you jumped 'em from behind?" demanded Sabin when they were back in the house. "By Gawd, Kid—"

THE KID, limping a little on his nicked leg, shifted his gun to holster it. Somehow his shaky finger brushed the trigger. The bullet plowed a rut in the Navajo blanket thrown over the table, nicked the base of the lamp, and whistled past Sabin. But not before it had sliced the skin of his gesturing hand. A red ribbon of blood appeared just at the wrist joint.

Sabin jumped but recovered quickly. He jerked out a bandanna to rub away the blood from the thin skin cut. "Holy hell, Kid, don't tell me you got a locoed trigger finger! Whew! That was close. Nothing but a scratch, though."

Out of hooded eyes, the Kid stared at the mark. It was his dreaded bullet brand. He heard himself mumbling his regrets. And then, without quite realizing why, he abruptly decided to say nothing about his incapacitated arms, or about his famed draw that no longer existed. He wasn't going to quit the Maverick country or the trial either. He would bluff it out. . . .

THREE days later, the trial of "Henry Gregg" formally opened. The Kid had come into town the night before with Sabin and his party. Sabin had taken rooms at the hotel on the second floor near the back stairs. This made it easier for Washita Mount, deputy to the Maverick marshal, to slip in and out unnoticed. Lobart, shadowed by his limping gun guard, Vetters, who had rejoined him in town, came in the back way too, without registering as a guest. He said it would look better if he stayed in the background as much as possible. The furtive moves made the Kid uneasy.

"These jaspers half act as if they were on trial themselves," he told himself. He mulled over it through a restless night. But all his suspicions returned to one cold fact. That Nichols of the red face was trying to get Sam Sabin, and apparently because Sabin was backing the accused man, Gregg. It was incontrovertible.

As the pre-dawn lighted gray the window panes, he could come to but one conclusion, one possible solution. Somebody was as interested in having this Gregg found guilty and hanged as Sam Sabin was in getting him off. And that somebody had hired this Nichols to stop Sabin from gaining his end. The Kid dozed, wondering why this other party was so plumb determined to get Gregg out of the way. The only logical answer could be that the other party feared Gregg.

When the Kid, Sabin and Lawyer Bartlett appeared on the hotel veranda after breakfast the next morning, they were the center of interest. Men came up and pumped Sabin's hand and wished him luck, were awed when they were introduced to the Kid and shook his hand too.

"We heard how some snakes tried to dry-gulch the Kid," one of them put it, "the minute the word got out you'd brought him in here to try to track down the real guilty gent, Sabin! Looks like somebody is a-aiming to rod their brand uh justice down our throats. Don't back water, Sabin!"

Sam Sabin's sly scheme of having those gun-slicks slap lead at the Kid had had a double-barrelled effect. Not only had it helped convince Solo there was a snake in the high grass, somebody trying to interfere with justice. Also, it had turned public opinion heavily in Sabin's, and indirectly in the prisoner's favor. The town had swung markedly to the side of Sabin who apparently was being persecuted for his stand in favor of Gregg.

Down the main road, a flat-sounding bell began to toll slowly. It was the signal that court was to be held. Sabin and his party went down the plank sidewalk to the town hall where the trials were held. It was a big barnlike building, used for dances and as a church when a travelling preacher hit Maverick, down toward the creek but a little before you

reached the jailhouse. Mount was over in the doorway of the marshal's office, towering over the plump chief town marshal, Bengoll. Bengoll was one of those white-haired fierce-eyed little men who tried to pretend he wasn't putting on weight. He was still chief marshal, though it was an effort for him to haul himself into a saddle, mainly through Holy Ben Batt's friendship. Dabbling at his nose against the alkali dust, looking like an oversized mouse, Lawyer Bartlett went trotting over there to accompany his client to court.

HE HAD conferred with "Henry Gregg" in his cell last night. "The man puzzles me," had been his reaction when he came back to the hotel. "For a man who may be hung, he evinces little interest in the case. You'd think he had some secret guarantee he was going to get off scot free."

There was a considerable throng about the double doors to the town hall with its stubby square tower, but it was no howling emotionally-aroused mob. Folks hadn't poured in from the surrounding country as if for a gala affair. After all, this "Henry Gregg" was an unknown, no colorful notorious big potato of the owlhoot. Through them, the stocky Sabin smiling around friendily, moved inside his hard-cased cowhands. A figure slipped through the flank of the latter.

"Kid. . . . The Big Man says you should have this just in case they make you shuck your hardware at the door." The Kid looked down and the limping apologetic-eyed Vetters, Lobart's personal guard, was at his elbow. Vetters was sliding a .41, the little Gambler's Special into the Kid's hand before the latter knew he had it. It was a gun made to be toted in a special pocket sewed in the waistband of the trousers. Vetters drooped an eyelid knowingly. Then he was gone with, "The Big Man's orders, pard!"

Solo resented the idea of taking orders from the big politician, but there was nothing to do but slip the weapon inside his waistband then. A couple of special deputies were making men surrender their hoglegs just inside the door. At once, Sabin protested, genially but firmly with his hands clamped over his holster tops.

"I've been shot once, gents. It isn't fair to ask me to expose myself defenseless."

"All right, fellas," said Mount who had come over.

"And my friend, the Kid here, . . ." insisted Sabin.

Mount curled his lip. "Whose after him? Huh?"

Sabin pointed to the small patch of bandage on the back of the Kid's neck just above his shirt collar. He believed, as Solo had led him to, that it was a mere nick received when those gun-slicks tried to trap him in town. Mount nodded reluctantly. He was jealous because he saw the Kid becoming more important than he himself in the eyes of his two secret partners.

A HOT, dusty atmosphere stung the nostrils inside the big low-ceiled hall. They were unable to open half the windows. Men were already mopping sweat from tanned faces, squirming uncomfortably on the backless benches. Because it was no secret Sabin was behind the accused man, he and his party were led to a front bench at one side of the middle aisle right up against the rope rigged in lieu of a railing across the front end of the hall. Inside the rope, there were a couple of tables for counsel, twelve straight-backed chairs in two rows of six each over against one wall. Beyond them was a small low platform for the musicians at a dance or the preacher at a prayer meeting. Now a flat-topped desk was set up on it for the judge. And beside it was a battered armchair for the witness. Lazy droning flies buzzed over it all.

Sabin had just snapped his watch case shut and said it was nine o'clock when a special deputy stopped grinning at a friend and ordered everybody to stand up. Feet scraped and a fresh cloud of dust filtered up from

the dry floor planks when a side door at the back end of the building opened.

"His Honor, Judge Batt," said the deputy. And Holy Ben Batt in a black frock coat and with iron-gray hair slicked down with water marched in. He mounted the platform and moved behind the desk. The deputy went over quickly and took a couple of big volumes off the latter and shifted them around behind the desk. Little Batt needed them on his chair so more than his eyebrows would show above the level of the imposing high-rigged desk.

Hardly was he seated when his roving eyes froze and his eyebrows jerked down sternly at the corners. He had sighted the Kid and recognized him by his rig. Batt recalled what he had said when that Red Nichols told him the Silver Kid was mixed in with the slayers of Randall, brother of that Deaf John Dean. Batt had said it couldn't be the real Kid, that it must be somebody impersonating him. The real Kid never bucked the Law. Now, Batt wondered about that. From the description he had heard of Solo Strant, this man down in the front row was him. And he was sitting with Sabin who was plumb set on getting the prison off in this case.

Batt thumbnail-scraped his fresh shaven chin as he wondered if there could be any connection. Then the deputy coughed discreetly. Holy Ben Batt picked up the gavel, rapped the desk sharply three quick times.

"The court of Maverick is now in session. . . . Selection of jurors is the first order of the day!"

THE picking of a jury was a simple matter according to Judge Batt's routine. On one of the tables was a large box containing the names of the citizens of Maverick. The deputy shoved in his arm, selected a piece of paper and intoned the name. The first one was, "Alex Paul." The name was repeated. There was some scuffling in the crowded back of the hall among the standees. And Paul, a bony man with tow hair, a clerk in a store, came forward self-consciously dropping his hat as he stepped over the rope barrier.

"Mr. Paul, are you any relation to either the deceased or the defendant in this case? Louder please! You aren't! All right. Put your hand on the Bible! Do you swear to solemnly and honestly do your duty without fear or favoritism as a member of this jury, so help you, God?"

Alex Paul swore in a voice that went shrill with self-consciousness, then was waved over to one of the of straight chairs of the jury box. A titter started as his shoes squeaked audibly in the quiet. Batt whacked the desk with the gavel. His wheeling eyes rested a moment on the Kid again. But Holy Ben Batt realized there was nothing in the name of the Law he could do. The only evidence against him was the story of an outlaw, Nichols.

"Charlie Vinton," called out the deputy, selecting another name from the box. He repeated it, peering around. A buzz passed through the courtroom. There was a chuckle. A bearded man came up to the rope and spoke to the deputy sotto voice.

"Charlie's been on a three-day drunk, Tim," he said.

Batt's gavel banged again at a fresh burst of laughter. He threatened to clear the courtroom. A third name was called. Midway back in the seats, a man rose to come forward. Glancing back to see him, a moving piece of white caught the Kid's eye in the rear of the room. It was the white of a sling supporting a man's bandaged arm. He was among the standing bunch back there. And he wore a white calfskin vest.

The Kid placed him, even though he didn't know his face. He was the one of the ambushing bunch he had shot in the arm in the running fight down the lane behind the main street that evening. Solo remembered how that white calfskin vest gleamed in the rain. The Kid was on his feet and pushing over knees to get to the aisle. The prospective juror advancing blundered into him. When the Kid got around him, he saw men in the rear closing up around where the one in the white vest had departed.

The Kid thrust his way through the throng in the big vestibule and got out onto the front steps. The man was nowhere among the loungers outside. Then Solo spotted him. The man was just swinging into the hull of a pony at hitchrack down the line. And the Kid made the mistake of crying out, of giving warning as was his custom before busting a cap on a gent. The other twisted and looked back and recognized the Kid's outfit with its silver trappings. The next instant, the man was spurring away and cutting off into an open lot between two buildings at that end of the town.

Solo's hands criss-crossed before his lithe body in the deadly cross-arm draw. Only it was woefully slow. And his hands were feeble-gripped when they fumbled for the butts. For the moment, he had forgotten he no longer possessed his draw. Black-eyed he turned back inside without unholstering. It would have been a waste of time.

CHAPTER XI

IT WAS hotter than the inside of an oven in the hall by the time the jury was selected. The last juror, a bald man with a crutch who was the town's undertaker, found his chair in the jury box. The Kid noticed that Sabin beside him was writing rapidly, eyes on the jury box. It was a list of the jury. Batt ordered the prisoner brought into court.

There was a rising hum in the road outside. Then, again the rear side door was opened. Mount strode in. After him, manacled, came the prisoner with a couple of guards. Deaf John Dean was a small wiry, insignificant man with a narrow snaky face running down to a sharp chin and a big straight nose. His oiled hair was irregularly parted on one side and shining black. He stopped and spread his legs to look over the courtroom, scorn plain in his sunken eyes. Solo Strant had seen a wolf look out of the dark that way. One of the guards ordered him to move on. Dean did not seem to hear till the man jerked his arm and Dean looked around and the guard repeated the order. Then Dean walked unhurriedly to a chair at one of the tables.

"Can't hear good," Sabin explained to the Kid. "It seems one of the posse clubbed him over the head when he thought Gregg was making a break. Gregg says it's affected his ears." Gregg shifted the lightless eyes over his shoulder to Sabin. Sabin lifted one his gauntleted hands in answer. The Kid wondered if Sabin wore those fringed white gauntlets to cover the bullet slice over the back of his right hand.

The trial got under way with Holy Ben Batt reading the charge—murder in the commission of a felony—and asking the prisoner how he chose to plead. Gregg dropped back into the chair and muttered:

"Not guilty, uh course. Think I'm a danged idiot?"

THE Kid decided then this Holy Ben Batt was a big man in mind. He ignored the prisoner's sneering be-damned-to-you attitude, ordering the prosecutor to proceed. The prosecutor was B. C. Costello, a town lawyer, a plain man in a rumpled gray suit with a face like Lincoln's. Simplicity and sincerity stood out all over him as he began haltingly, calling the first witness to the stand. He was Gandy, one of the possemen. Costello got confused and called him "Mr. Gregg," then corrected himself stumblingly.

Over at the other table, Jackson Bartlett snickered aloud. He had followed the prisoner in. Men in the room were still gawking at Bartlett's city clothes and the high buttoned shoes and the gates-ajar collar. Batt scowled at Bartlett and the St. Louis lawyer busied himself smoothing his fastidious pearl-gray cravat.

The posseman's testimony was cut and dried. He had served many times as a posseman. He was hanging around the jail when a neighbor of the Hawkers' rode in with word of the shooting out at their place. He repeated how Gene Hawker, left for dead, had told that Gregg, one of the horse thieves, had been shot up in

the leg and Gene Hawker didn't think he could travel far. He told how they had closed in and taken Gregg up in the hills. The prisoner had surrendered without a fight, he concluded. That was all. It established the background of the crime and identified the prisoner in court as affiliated with it. Batt wiped perspiration from his forehead and looked at Bartlett.

The city lawyer rose unhurriedly and didn't even bother looking the witness' way much less going over to it. "You remember the incidents of the night Eb Hawker was slain and the ensuing manhunt very well," he said.

"Sure. It was the night of April 16th," said Gandy very promptly. "We rode out that night, picked up the trail after daylight. And it was the middle of the next night when we give him a catching up in the hills."

Bartlett nodded, voice still colorless with disinterest. "As a posseman, how much do you get paid?"

"Three dollars a day."

"Not bad. And you say you've been a posseman on several occasions, yes?"

GANDY was very proud of that. Yes, he had hired out to go with a posse many times. He was with the bunch that caught up with Wentworth. Also behind the marshal the time they cornered that tough rustler in the cave on the Little Bow and he held out for four and a half days. And last autumn he had been nicked in the arm on another manhunt. He started to peel back his shirt sleeve to exhibit the scar.

"And each time you were paid three dollars per day for riding as a member of the posse, Mr. Gandy?"

"Why sure. I—"

"Mr. Gandy, what do you do to earn a living ordinarily—when you aren't out hunting down men?" fired Bartlett in a cutting voice.

Gandy went red, started to speak, hemmed and hawed. "Everybody—I mean—well, I do odd jobs." Everybody knew that the good-natured Gandy was one of the laziest men in Maverick. He would give anybody a hand, but as far as holding down a regular job for pay, that was another matter with him.

"I see." Bartlett tapped the table sharply with a pencil. "You just get along as well as you can—until you get a chance to pick up some real money with a posse. That is correct?"

"Uh—sure. Yes," Gandy choked out. He was like a blind cow in a mud-hole. He knew he was trapped in something but not sure what.

"And you hope to have more of these jobs riding with posses, don't you? They help you buy vittles and a few drinks, don't they?"

"Well, y-yes," admitted the sweating Gandy.

"So you wouldn't do anything—or say anything—that would endanger your chance of being employed as a manhunter in the future. You wouldn't say anything that would get you in bad with the authorities who pick the *heroes* who get paid three dollars per day for riding in a posse, would you?"

"Uh—yes—I mean,no. I mean—well—uh—"

"That's all," said Bartlett with a half bow to the judge. He sat down as if the witness had never existed.

THE courtroom buzzed with admiration. They had gotten the point. This city lawyer had invalidated all of Gandy's testimony. The fact in itself wasn't so important to them. It was how slickly the trick had been worked. Sabin nudged the Kid in the ribs. Batt's mouth tightened against impatience. He was used to rapid-fire trials, proud of Maverick's plain on-the-spot judgments. But above all, he was going to be just. Nobody would be able to say this St. Louis lawyer had not been permitted to present his full case.

Costello was still blinking as he brought on his second witness. The local lawyer man had never dreamed Gandy's testimony could be broken down. After all, everybody in town knew Gandy was as honest as was the day long.

The second witness was a local

doctor, a typical cow-town sawbones, who had gone out to the Hawker place with the posse. His story was simple enough. It consisted of relating how he had found Eb Hawker dead with at least three slugs in his carcass. Either of two of the bullets could have caused his death, he said. One had torn away part of his head. Another had entered the shoulder, been deflected downward by smashed collar bone, and passed through a lung. Gene Hawker, he went on, had been in precarious condition. He had had a bullet-brown leg, suffered two knife wounds, and had his skull cracked by a blow. A gun barrel blow, the doctor supposed.

Bartlett was on his feet at once. Suppositions were not part of the doctor's testimony, he opined. The sawbones had not been present when the alleged blow was delivered, hence could not know.

Batt nodded, aware now that part of the strategy of the counsel for defense was to delay, delay, and delay some more. But legally, he was correct on that point. "Jury will disregard last statement of the witness," he instructed them.

Costello asked the doctor to continue as regards Gene Hawker. The sawbones repeated that Gene, brother to the dead man, was in bad shape. He had described the two raiders, one being the alleged killer, before going unconscious.

Costello, the local lawyer, cut his eyes at Bartlett and brought out a point then. "How clear would you say Gene Hawker's mind was then? How definite was his description of the killer, doctor?"

BARTLETT feigned patting back a yawn as the doctor swore that Gene Hawker was fully conscious and clear-headed, and that he had described the killer in accurate detail. He concluded by telling how he had brought Hawker into town in a wagon the next morning and been surprised when he pulled through. He had lost enough blood to drop a horse but had somehow rallied. Costello indicated he was through with direct examination.

Bartlett walked over to the doctor, smiling. He asked a few gentle questions that seemed pointless. Batt leaned forward ominously. Then the city lawyer said, "Perhaps we should contribute the recovery of the wounded man to your skill, doctor, riding out on a cold wet night like that on an errand of mercy."

The smiling sawbones shook his head. "Oh, it was a clear night."

"My mistake," mumbled Bartlett, turning away.

"Danged if it were clear that night," spoke up a man down in the audience. "I recollect well 'cause it was the night my mare broke outa the feed lot. It had been raining earlier. And it was black as the inside of a hat out. All cloudy and—" Somebody shut him up.

But Bartlett had spotted him. As the next witness took the stand, Bartlett went over and spoke to white-haired Bengoll, the chief marshall. Bengoll said the spectator who had interrupted was Pop Rogers. Bengoll promised to have him on hand as a witness when Bartlett wanted him.

THE THIRD witness was another possemen who had sighted the alleged killer in the daylight when he was making a break for the hills. He claimed he had recognized him from the description given by the wounded Gene Hawker. When Costello asked with an attempt at dramatics if he could pick out the killer now, the third witness stood up and pointed at "Henry Gregg."

Gregg, John Dean, was chewing on something. He didn't stop chewing, only bared his teeth in a contemptuous smirk. And Jackson Bartlett simply gestured negligently that he didn't want to cross examine.

The fourth witness for the prosecution was the chief marshal, Bengoll himself. He described how, some days after the prisoner had been brought in, he had been taken before Gene Hawker who still lay in bed. Gene Hawker, said the marshal, had unhesitantly pointed at the man and named him as his brother's slayer.

Bartlett took over, neat and confident as ever as he shot a cuff of his

beruffled shirt. "We wouldn't think of trying to impugn your testimony, marshal. As the strong arm of the Law. . . . " He went on in that vein for some moments. Then he launched into a series of elaborate questions to bring out the exact circumstances under which the alleged killer had been brought before Gene Hawker.

Holy Ben Batt finally lost patience. His gavel came down sharply. "Just where are the questions of counsel for defense leading? The time of this court is valuable and—"

Bartlett ran a hand over his sleek yellow hair, drilling Batt with his sly eyes. "I am bringing out the fact that Gene Hawker was informed they were going to bring in the captive—and then was confronted by the prisoner, Gregg, alone! *Alone,* I say, Your Honor. Not by several men thus compelling him to pick out one. But he was shown *one* man. Under those circumstances, Your Honor, a blind man could have identified the alleged killer!"

The courtroom buzzed like an upset beehive then. Batt slammed the desk with his gavel. Then he called a recess for grub.

Back at the hotel as they ate, Sam Sabin was jubilant. "We'll lick 'em," he said repeatedly. When the Kid remained silent, he prodded him.

SOLO didn't agree. "Mr. Bartlett is winning a heap of legal fine points," he admitted. "But he isn't proving Gregg didn't do the killing."

Bartlett looked up from his cup of coffee. "I am undermining the testimony of the witnesses for the prosecution," he said patronizingly.

"Sure, the folks in the courtroom think it's a great show. But when that jury comes to voting—well, they're going to remember that this Gregg was wounded and was hiding out up in the hills where he had been tracked by the posse. Innocent men don't hide out."

Sabin tapped the Kid's shoulder. "Don't worry, Kid. We got a witness of our own, a third man who was there that night. And he saw Condon, the one who died of his wounds with Gregg, kill Eb Hawker."

When they went out into the lobby, the Kid scratched his head. "Say, I thought you said you were going to try to hunt down one of the bunch who tried to get you—then make him confess as to who was hiring him."

Sabin shrugged. "Well—my boys are on the lookout . . ."

The Kid then told him of spotting the man with the white vest in the throng at the town hall. But Sabin didn't seem interested and said nothing about doing anything about it. Trailing cigar smoke and beaming around, he walked off.

It came to Solo Strant then. In telling him about the case as they rode onto the Maverick range from Iron Hill, Sabin had not mentioned a third man along with Gregg and the now dead Condon that night. The Kid scratched the silver skull slung at his throat. He could smell skunk sweat somehow on the wind. . . .

CHAPTER XII

GENE HAWKER himself was the first witness for the prosecution when the afternoon session opened. He was half carried over from the jail, a tall big-boned man who had been powerful in his prime. But now he was shrunken so the skin hung on his body. They gave him a slug of redeye after he took the witness chair. And Costello brought out his story.

It was a grim one and the honesty of it was obvious. Hawker told of how he and his late brother were wakened by a commotion out in their barn during the night. How they had gone out. And the fight that had ensued between them and the two raiders, the dead Condon and Henry Gregg. Eb Hawker had gone down, wounded. And when he continued to fire from a prone position, this Gregg had hit him again, then run up and pumped slugs into his unconscious body. Hawker wasn't a weak man, but his face twisted and his voice broke off at that point. It was Bartlett who hurried over with a drink of water for the witness.

But when Bartlett opened up on

cross-examination, it reminded the Kid of a coyote nipping away at a wounded steer. He made Hawker relate again every detail of the gunfight. He checked him on item after item. It was sheer torture for the still ill man.

"What's the matter? Don't you think my—my brother died that night?" he finally cried out in a torn voice.

"When guns are fired, there's a lot of gunsmoke around, Mr. Hawker," Bartlett went on inexorably. "Yet you seemed to see right through it all—even while you were being shot at and shooting yourself."

He twitted and doubted till Hawker twisted with rage in the chair. He was beside himself.

"And in all that shooting, the lantern you and your brother carried out to the barn wasn't smashed?"

"Of course it was smashed. The first shots put it out!"

"Oh . . . Then, without any light, you saw all this?"

The veins stood out in Gene Hawker's hands as they twisted on the arms of the witness chair. "Good Gawd, I saw it, I saw it! It was a clear night. Real bright. I saw my brother die! I saw that coyote—"

"A clear night, eh," Bartlett picked it up. "Nice and *bright*, eh. Nice bright moon, eh."

COSTELLO was on his feet to enter an exception. His client had said nothing about a moon.

"Was there a moon out?" Bartlett whipped at the witness.

"Yes—I—I guess there was! Hell man, I wasn't studying the weather! I was trying to save my wounded brother and—"

"Sure, sure. You remember everything—exactly and in detail—except, my friend, you didn't remember the kind of a night it was he died. . . ."

"The sun could have come out in the middle of the night—and it wouldn't have seemed important in the moment your brother was dying!" Gene Hawker barked back.

Jackson Bartlett minced halfway across the courtroom, shaking his hands at the roof and heaven as if he were asked to believe too much. He spoke over his shoulder.

"Hawker, whoever wrote out your testimony for you didn't think to tell you what to say about the weather, did they?"

Pandemonium broke loose. Hawker broke loose. Hawker swayed to his feet to curse Bartlett furiously. Costello waved his hands before Holy Ben Batt as he protested the tactics of opposing counsel. And the sly sauave Bartlett was back before the bench, apologizing to the court and to the witness. But he knew he had sown doubt.

"You're mad enough to shoot me right now if you had a gun, aren't you, Hawker?" he asked the witness.

Ashen, shaking with fury, Hawker husked, "By Gawd, man—"

"Yes, of course. If my brother had been slain, I'd be mad too. Blind mad, perhaps. I'd want to see *somebody* pay. And you were so blind mad that night, Hawker—and you've shown how mad you could get just now—that you gave a description of a man you might have seen earlier down the road that night, didn't you, Hawker?"

The uproar was tremendous. The prisoner, "Henry Gregg," alone sat calmly smirking. Batt broke the head of his gavel as he adjourned court for the day. . . . .

THE KID prowled Maverick that evening. He was restless and he knew it was the old impatience for bona fide action churning inside him. But he couldn't throw off the mental uneasiness, the hunch that things weren't as they seemed in the picture. At the hotel that night, he and Sabin had had an argument about the trial. For a few moments, Sabin had discarded his mask of geniality, but Solo had been coldly blunt about not liking the way things were being handled at the trial.

"It isn't a man's way of d o i n g things, Sabin." He had disliked Bartlett's way of sowing confusion, of twisting witnesses' remarks, of casting slurs on the characters of the witnesses. That wasn't a stand-up way of fighting. "Any chunkhead

can see those witnesses aren't out and out lying to hang a man. That lawyer man isn't offering a danged whit of proof this Gregg didn't do the killing."

"Kid, you've heard the old one of there being more than one way to skin a cat. Let's go down and have a drink. When you go hunting polecats, you ain't particular about smelling sweet yourself, fella. Remember, we're trying to save an innocent man's hide."

The Kid told himself that last repeatedly as he moved around Maverick. The town was now seething with the trial. It was taking on importance. Before, nobody could see how even Sam Sabin could do much to save this Gregg. Now, after seeing how the St. Louis lawyer man worked, some folks were conceding the accused man a chance. Solo overheard plenty of talk in that tenor as he moved in and out of barrooms and gambling hells and honky tonks. Actually he was circulating to see if he could cut the sign of the hombre with the white vest. But his mind was twisted up with this situation.

"They are trying to save an innocent jasper," he told himself again "Just because it isn't being done by the swapping of lead. . . ." But then he began to wonder about his own role in the proceedings. With Sabin making no apparent effort to track down the gents, especially that Nichols, who had tried to get him, the Kid himself felt useless. Bartlett seemed all Sabin's camp needed now. They—

THE galvanized as he saw a white-vested gent walk around the corner of an ell in a side street whisky mill. But this man had one empty eye socket and was hollow chested. The other had broad shoulders and a pigeon-breasted chest. Coal-oil lamps were being doused along the main road as the Kid turned on down to the creek. The jailhouse was like a dirty-white tomb under the blanched moon as he passed. There was no sign of his man in a ramshackle little place down on the water's edge. He tossed some silver on the bar for a drink for a hollow-eyed hussy who tried to take him in tow and quit there.

He was still too restless to turn in and found himself going down a road following the creek. A few hundred yards down was a knot of old paintless places where the original settlement of Maverick had been made. A light from the rear gleamed faintly through the begrimed store window of a place he saw was a restaurant. A cup of java would taste good inasmuch as the place still seemed open. He went in the front door. The light came from a candle on a table in the rear of the little place. Nobody appeared.

Solo moved toward the rear. Near the back, the door of a side room opened. Two men came backing out, listening to the final words of somebody inside. Beyond them, Solo saw the vast hulk of Big Man Lobart hunched over a table. One of the pair exiting turned and strode toward a a back door. A puff of wind licked up the candle and its yellow glow played over an angry red knife scar snaking horizontally across the back of the man's neck. It stood out a half inch above the collar of the gray shirt he wore.

"All right, Kerr," said Big Man Lobart from inside. "Now you understand how things are. Stay outa sight and—"

"Sure," said Kerr. There was something familiar about him. Something made him twist halfway to the front as he took a stride rearward after his friend. It was White Vest.

At sight of Solo, Kerr sucked his breath so hard it sounded like the hiss of a boiling kettle. One of his spurs grated as he flung his legs wide in the gunman's stanch, slaunching his chest heaved. He made some kind of a wordless noise low in his throat, a throat constricted with terror. He knew what, who, he was up against. The lethal Silver Kid. Further back, the rear door clicked shut after the man with the scarred neck.

THE KID'S hands had darted criss-cross fashion in the draw for those guns rigged butts forward.

Or had tried to dart. Halfway across his body, they fluttered, slowed to a creeping motion. The muscles of his arms felt like sorghum. On the left side of his face, a bead of sweat left an ice-cold track as it slid down. Kerr was like a cornered rat. When he saw death smirking in his teeth, he would clutch for guns in a last desperate gesture of self defense, never figuring to win. But he would grab gun steel, and shoot, shoot straight and fast like the gun-slick he was. Solo Strant knew how he himself would shoot—rather, wouldn't shoot. Yet if he waited and this Kerr got hopeful, wondering.

"Shake hands with Mr. Death, amigo," the Kid's subconscious mind said to him. "The best of you get introduced sometime. . . . "

Lobart's massive form filled most of the doorway. He took in the situation. From what Sabin had told him of the staged ambush, he savvied now things stood between the Kid and Kerr. Lobart said nothing with his mouth. His eyes side-slid to Vetters hunched in his shadow. His eyes said something. Vetters' tongue poked between his teeth. Muzzle froth poked twice from the gun that had seemed to grow out of his hand.

Kerr coughed, of God, "You're double-crossin'—" He broke in half as if he had been kicked in the belly. Crimson painted a ragged rosette on his temple. "You double—" He went down and rolled half under a table. And little blood stained the floor because his heart had already stopped.

Vetters darted to the back door and out. When the Kid got out there too, there was no sign of Scar Neck, who had been with Kerr.

"That rat!" Lobart said unperturbably afterward. "So he was one of the party who tried to dry gulch you, eh, Kid?" He went on to tell how Kerr had been in Sabin's Slash-S bunkhouse once but fired when Sabin caught him poking around his desk. That had been shortly after Gregg had been taken in by the posse, Lobart said. "I knew he was a dirty little rat! Sent word he wanted to see me here tonight. Claimed he knew something about Sam's past and wanted me to pay for silence, I guess. . . .

"Say, Kid, you heard me warning him to stay outa sight if he didn't want me to put a window in his skull. . . ."

CHAPTER XIII

IT WAS Sabin who shook Solo awake the next morning while the dawn was still a gray blanket outside the window panes. Sabin seemed excited and exuberant. Lobart and Lawyer Bartlett, the latter in a white nightgown, were waiting in the next room. The Big Man already had a cigar going; it was sickening that early in the day.

"Well, it's come," crowed Sabin. He whacked the Kid on the back. "Solo here was a-sweating 'cause he didn't think we had a real defense for poor Gregg! Ha-ha!"

The Kid asked what had come and they gave him the story. It was the third man Sabin had mentioned before, the one who had been with Gregg and the dead Condon. They didn't have the man. Because of his own past, Sabin said, he was afraid to come in and testify. But he had given a sworn statement to a lawman up the line before hitting the trail for places unknown.

"Here it is." Lobart smoothed a sheet of paper beside a freshly opened envelope and poked it over at the Kid. "Read it, Kid."

It was a formally sworn and attested statement, signed by one William Mays. In it, he vowed he was with Jack Condon the night they tried to steal a pony and killed a man back in the Maverick country Mays said Condon had done the killing. He concluded by claiming he had made this written statement because he had learned Henry Gregg was being held for the killing, and Mays did not want to see an innocent man go to the gallows. "I knew Jack Condon was a killer and had ridden with some of Deaf John Dean's boys," he ended. It certainly looked legal.

"Wait till we spring that on them

in court—our surprise witness," Jackson Bartlett said, striding around in his night shirt.

"Simple and to the point," said Sam Sabin. "This Jack Condon was a known killer. Mays *saw* him do the killing."

Cutting his eyes at the Kid once, Lobart picked up the document and slowly and clearly read it word by word, aloud. He looked at the Kid again when he finished. The Kid wondered if perhaps Lobart was under the illusion he was deaf. It seemed like so much two-bit melodrama.

THERE WAS a bigger crowd outside the town hall when they arrived for the trial that morning The clever Bartlett surprised everybody when he reopened cross examination of Gene Hawker. There was no fireworks. Bartlett asked a simple question. He wanted to know if Hawker had ever had occasion to borrow money in Maverick. Costello objected at once. Bartlett had the kid gloves on.

"Are you afraid the character of your witness will not stand up under exposure, attorney?" Bartlett purred, smoothing the deep purple cravat he wore today. 'Your Honor, as to the relevancy of the examination, I wish simply to assure myself the witness was not bounden to anybody."

Batt nodded and Costello, flushed, withdrew his objection. Hawker freely admitted that he had borrowed money. Twice from the bank to tide them over between crops on their little place.

"And the notes were redeemed before due," he snapped back at Bartlett.

"Any other occasion when you borrowed?"

Hawker said there was. A famous Eastern physician had stopped off to see his late brother en route to the Pacific Coast. That loan had been repaid in full too.

"But you didn't say you got it from the bank? You don't wish to state where you borrowed it?"

Hawker swallowed hard and shook his head. No, he didn't wish to name the lender in that loan. His ears worked. As several folks in the courtroom knew, the money had been borrowed from Mom Ferris who ran the dry goods store. Hawker didn't want to admit publicly he had borrowed from a woman.

BARTLETT shrugged. "Naturally, it happens to all of us. When one borrows from a person—a powerful person in the community, perhaps—one feels indebted, possibly even in their power. . . . That's all," he clipped off as Costello rose to protest.

B. C. Costello had gotten his second wind during the night. He had evaluated Bartlett's wiliness and was no longer overawed by the big-city lawyer. He walked over for re-cross examination in rebuttal. It was simple and good.

"Mr. Hawker, your brother was killed by *somebody*—and I hope counsel for the defense will not contest that point. Is that right?"

"Yes."

"Being a normal human critter, you want this man punished, I believe."

"Yes."

"If they strung up that fat man with the red neckerchief in the back corner of the room, would you be satisfied?"

"No. He didn't kill Eb."

"When will you be satisfied?"

"Only when they hang Eb's murderer, sir!"

Costello shook black hair off his forehead as he pointed to bored-looking Gregg. "Have you any other reason for hating the defendant?"

Hawker breathed in hard. "I never clapped eyes on him till the night my brother—died. How could I have other reasons?"

Costello faced Judge Batt. "The prosecution rests. . ."

IT WAS effective all right. It swung attention back to the kernel of the case. Bartlett knew it. His gold-plated toothpick fell from his face onto the table. He shuffled papers and law books noisily.

The first witness of the defense was that Pop Rogers, the spectator who had disagreed aloud when the local sawbones had testified that it was a clear night. Delighted at becoming an actor in the drama and windy in the bargain, Pop was ready to talk all night about the weather, and Bartlett let him have his head.

Pop went into detail. He had been playing cards with his brother-in-law. He and the brother-in-law had a spat some months before but had patched it up that day. Or was it the day before? Pop wasn't certain. Batt warned him to get to the point. It was when he went out to refill the bucket at the well that he noticed the mare was gone from the feed lot. That was exactly at ten-thirty. He knew because his clock had said ten-forty.

"And that clock of mine—bought-en at Tighlman's Store—she gains ten minutes every day just as reg'lar as the sun sets! I only bought it eight —no, mebbe nine—months ago—"

Batt's new gavel made a crack like a pistol shot. "Mr. Bartlett, you will bring your witness to the point—or I shall dismiss him!"

Bartlett complied about halfway. He brought out, according to Pop Rogers, that at that time the drizzle had ceased. But there was neither moon nor stars. "Black as the inside uh a boot, by grab," Pop affirmed stoutly. "And she stayed that way." He continued to relate his adventures in tracking down the strayed mare, even baring a calf to show where he had gashed himself on a piece of barbed wire in the dark.

Costello didn't bother with cross examination. The next witness was a local barroom tough. He told of riding down across the range about sundown the day of the killing He passed the Hawker place and Gene was standing in front of the door. He knew Gene casually from having said hello around town. But Gene Hawker, apparently not recognizing him at a distance of twenty odd yards in broad daylight, had given no sign of recognition. At that testimony, Gene Hawker, seated against the side wall opposite the jury, brought down his cane angrily. Bartlett of course was casting doubt on his eyesight.

COSTELLO TOOK over briefly. He wanted to know what the saloon tough, one Edson, did for a living. Edson said he herded cows and had done some blacksmithing. When asked, he said the last outfit he had herded for was the Circle-C. It was in Montana, he admitted. He had blacksmithed in Dakota, the Black Hills, before going to Montana.

"How long have you been here in Maverick, Mr. Edson?"

Edson reddened "'Bout two years."

"That is all."

Bartlett twisted to scowl at Sam Sabin. The lawyer was riled that Sabin hadn't gotten him a gent with a better background to act as a witness. "Henry Gregg" sat paring a fingernail with a small wedge of wood. The Kid noticed that the third finger of his left hand had a white band on the flesh where a ring had been.

There was a pause in the proceedings while Batt sent a deputy out for a fresh pitcher of water. It was sultrier than the day before.

Sabin was buzzing, "Now comes the big surprise. Now comes the big surprise. Wait'll yuh see. . . "

The Kid wasn't listening, mind working on that killing last night when Lobart's gunman had drilled Kerr of the white vest. Lobart thought he had explained things satisfactorily, but Solo couldn't throw off the impression that Kerr had been dumbfounded at being fired on by Lobart's man.

There was a slight commotion as a man across the aisle rose to leave the courtroom. Two rows behind the Kid and Sabin a spectator jabbered excitedly as he pointed at the departing man. "I was talking to him last night, Eddie. That gent was in Iron Hill and walked inta the barroom there two minutes after Deaf John Dean was—"

Batt's gavel hammered for silence in the court.

"Yep, he saw him laying there dead

on the floor, that Deaf John Dean!" the man behind added.

When the Kid turned around to face front again, Gregg at the counsel table was staring past him to the man who had been jabbering excitedly about Dean. The Kid's eyes lidded as he wondered if it was possible, if what he seemed to see was so. . . .

JACKSON Bartlett stepped nimbly before the judge's bench. "The next piece of evidence in this case, Your Honor. . ." When he heard that, the "next piece of evidence" instead of the next witness, Costello hopped up.

"—is a sworn statement by a witness not present!"

"A witness—a witness to the murder?" demanded Batt.

"Exactly. A third man, Your Honor, who was present, a fact the prosecution seems to have chosen to overlook. A man who saw Ebenezer Hawker slain—and saw who did it. With the court's permission, I shall read the statement and then submit it as evidence and—"

"No! By Gawd, no—I mean. . ." Costello got a grip on himself. "Objection, Your Honor, please... I protest the acceptance in this court of a written statement on the grounds that a statement can not be cross examined! In common jurisprudence, precedent has been e s t a b l i s h e d against the admission of a written statement."

Holy Ben Batt nodded, hammered once for quiet. "Objection—sustained!" And he shook his head at Bartlett standing with the paper.

Bartlett walked back to the table with little shoulders slumped dejectedly. But it was a pose. He dropped the statement, toyed with a pencil, then looked up to the bench.

"I bow to the will of the court. With Your Honor's permission, as next witness for the defense, I call Mr. Solo Strant. . ."

CHAPTER XIV

THE courtroom still buzzed and sputtered with astonishment as the Kid stood before the witness chair, hand on the Bible held out by the deputy, and repeated the oath after him.

"I, Solo Strant, solemnly swear to tell the truth—the whole truth—and —nothing that isn't the truth—" Solo sat down, crossing his legs in the brush-scarred bat-wing chaps. *The Silver Kid. . . The Silver Kid himself,* it pulsed through the town hall.

The Kid was still baffled as to why he had been called. Sabin had practically pushed him off the bench to start him forward. And now little ferret-faced yellow-haired Jackson Bartlett paced past him. Somehow he looked like a cat smacking its lips. Deep inside, the Kid had a nasty feeling he was going to be used.

"You are the Mr. Strant sometimes known as the Silver Kid," Bartlett led off sharply, almost as if he were handling an opposition witness. At the Kid's affirmative, Bartlett went on with, "Are you in the hire of anybody in this section of the country, Mr. Strant?"

"No. Nor in the hire of anybody," Solo answered.

"Why are you here then?" Bartlett practically barked it.

The Kid stated that he had been present at an attempt on Sam Sabin's life and afterward had been shot at himself in what seemed an aftermath of the first incident. "I've been waiting around hoping for a word with some of the jaspers who're so careless in their lead-spraying," he explained in the soft-voiced way of understating a thing that he had.

It brought a chuckle from the courtroom.

"Mr. Strant, did Mr. Sabin call you into his hotel room this morning?"

"Why, yes." The Kid still could not see where Bartlett was leading the testimony. Bartlett asked if one Joshua Lobart were present. "Yes, he was and—"

"Do you recall the conversation that ensued? I mean the general tenor of what was said, Mr. Strant?" Solo said he did and Bartlett said, "With the permission of the prosecutor, I will ask you to tell us in your own words."

"Well, they had just received the sworn statement of a man named William Mays concerning this case. In the statement, Mays said he was present the night of the killing and—"

COSTELLO was on his feet and breathing fire as he desperately objected strenuously. Bartlett dusted his face fastidiously with a silk handkerchief as Costello raved on. Batt looked at Bartlett at the finish.

"As the court doubtlessly realizes, Your Honor, a witness is permitted to repeat an overheard conversation."

Batt nodded to Solo Strant. "Continue with testimony, witness."

And the Kid told the story of the sworn statement by one William Mays. Costello sat with veins knotted in his forehead, helpless to prevent the jury hearing of the sworn statement.

"And that was all?" Bartlett said when Solo stopped.

"Well, then Mr. Lobart read the statement aloud."

"Would you mind repeating what he said as closely as you can." And it was in the court record.

The trial recessed over the noon hour.

When the afternoon session opened, word of Jackson Bartlett's coup had already swept through the cowtown. With the Kid back in the witness chair for cross examination, Batt had to send two deputies out to the front road. The throng bellying out from the doors there was so noisy they drowned out conversation in the hall itself.

Costello sweated on the Kid, vainly trying to break his story, to drive in one loophole. He made the Kid repeat again and again. Around the room men shook their heads ruefully. Costello was simply emphasizing the Kid's testimony, adding to the impact of the surprise sworn statement.

A deputy came back from the side door near the back end of the building and whispered to Deputy Marshal Mount. Mount signalled Costello. Begging the judge's pardon, the prosecutor went over to Mount, looked surprised, then stepped over to the half open door. A man outside passed him a note. As the lawyer read it, the Kid glanced by him to the messenger.

The next instant the witness chair scraped and the Kid slashed a hand for one of his guns on the opposite hip as he half rose. But again he had forgotten he no longer possessed the blinding swift draw. With a cry, Bengoll the chief marshal leaped out of his seat and ran toward the Kid, drawing. Still, normally Solo would have had plenty of time to drop the man outside the doorway before he could flee. He didn't know who the gent was, but he did know he had seen him before. He was one of those who'd been with Red Nichols out at Sabin's ranch.

But the Kid couldn't do more than get a firm grip on the butt of the holstered hogleg before the man outside saw what he was doing and vanished. In another moment the drum of hoofs sounded from behind the town hall.

"Hey, what the hell is this?" roared old Bengoll. And Batt jumped off his chair, dragging a Colts from a drawer of the desk as he did. The Kid settled back, smiling sheepishly and shrugging.

"Reckon it was a mirage. I thought I saw something pushing a gun in the open doorway. Sorry, *amigos.*"

STUFFING the note in his pocket, B. C. Costello came back. He requested an adjournment. "To give the prosecution time to produce an important witness, Your Honor." He said, when Batt asked, that he needed an adjournment of two days.

Bartlett proceeded to raise little short of hell, thin voice going shrill as he protested and argued. Batt finally roared him to silence and asked Costello how important the witness was.

"This man is the key to the defense offered by the accused, Your Honor! He will answer certain testimony offered by the defense."

Batt pondered for some moments, then nodded curtly. "Adjournment granted till Thursday at nine A. M.!"

THEY WERE worried that night up in Sam Sabin's suite of rooms in the hotel. Jackson Bartlett felt that he had had his case clinched if he could have sent it to the jury that day. The sworn statement of Bill Mays had been a shock to the prosecution. Bartlett had weakened the case of the opposition by raising the question of the weather conditions, had brought in the angle that grief-stricken Gene Hawker might be blinded by his craving for vengeance. Then he had ripped Costello's case down the middle with Solo Strant's testimony. With that fresh in the minds of the jury—

Sabin strode around incessantly. Big Man Lobart sat palming his face, the eyes devoid of warmth switching from object to object in the room as he discarded one theory after another. They didn't know what Costello had up his sleeve.

"I'd give a flat five hundred to know what that note said." And Bartlett put on his gray stove-pipe hat and left to visit his prisoner in the jail. When he returned in an hour, he reported that Gene Hawker was sick and a sawbones had been sent up to the jailhouse.

Lobart thumped the table. "No sense in all this sweating. If they break our defense, we got two alternatives. We. . . Well, I don't know. We'll have to have time, anyway." He realized the Kid was present.

Bartlett said he could get the time. "We'll put Gregg on the stand—though I hadn't planned to. And that'll mean Costello cross examines. Then I'll call back Hawker. He's sick. By the time I break him down, it'll mean another adjournment."

The Kid jerked down his sombrero and strode out. Sometimes it smelled to him as if they were twisting justice, doing everything to contravene it. After he departed, Lobart said what he had been going to say.

"We can always—as a last resort—go to work on some of the jury men outside of court. They don't keep 'em locked up. We can put the fear of Gawd into one or two—enough to hang the jury. And then—well—I've still got men working on Holy Ben Batt's past. Did you know he had a two-bit cow outfit over in Arizona before he came here?. . ."

The two days of adjournment dragged interminably for the action-craving Kid. He realized he had been used by Bartlett. Still, it seemed within the Law and justified. Solo saw no reason, regardless of legal procedure, why, when a man's life hung in the balance, such an important piece of evidence should be kept out of court. But he couldn't get over the feeling that Sabin and Lobart were pulling strings behind his back. Meanwhile he kept drifting around the big town, hoping to cut the sign of Scar Neck who had been with Kerr. And hoping for a glimpse of Red Nichols too, though he figured Nichols would keep under cover.

It was the afternoon of the second day that he saddled up his paint and rode down the road along the creek to the settlement some ten miles below Maverick. He simply had to have some kind of motion. On his way back it started to rain in slow steady slanting drops that laid a beady curtain over the gray of the afternoon. Sabin was puffing on a cigar in a porch rocker of the hotel when he got back. He kept shooting furtive glances at a young girl who had taken refuge from the rain on the porch. In a lull in the downpour, she darted down the steps and across the road into the General Store. Sabin let his cigar die and looked sad.

"WHEN YOU get older—and tougher—I suppose all young girls look like the one you were in love with once—when you were young." He spoke so low the Kid, who had dropped into the chair beside him, could scarcely hear.

Sabin relit his cigar, then forgot the match till it scorched his fingers and he threw it away with a curse. "I was in love with a little filly once—or thought I was. You know, Kid, whether you are or not isn't the important thing. It's thinking about it—and then it ain't love no more. You

savvy, mebbe—aw, hell," and he spat over the railing.

"Yeah, I was in love with a girl once. Probably, if I'd married her, she'd uh turned out to be an old shrew. Sure." He went on in a monotone as if talking to himself. "Mebbe she wouldn't uh let me smoke in the house or something. I don't know. . . Anyway, they was no question of *my* marrying her, when it came down to it. *She* wouldn't marry me. Can't say as I blame her—or her folks. After all, everybody knew my pop was a horse-thief. . ."

The Kid looked at him. "You didn't choose your pop."

Sabin nodded. "Thanks for that, Kid. . . None of us do, do we? Everybody in the little town up there in Montana knew it. But they was sorry for my Mom. So they never said nothing—to the Law or nobody. Pop'd go off on a little trip and then when he came home—oh, well. . . The town knew what he had been up to while he was away. But it sorta handicaps a growing boy, being the son of a horsethief. One day—after the girl turned me down—a fella called me that and I hauled my gun. We both missed. . . That night, he was shot in the back on his way home. It was blamed on me. I beat a lynch pack outa town by 'bout five minutes."

HIS ROCKER creaked as he remained silent for some moments. Then: "After that, I made up my mind I'd git me a big pile of dinero. Mebbe money'd make me respectable. Well, I done pretty well, I reckon. And—aw, Jehosophat, what am I gitting windy about?" He spat over the railing again, added softly, "But that girl had the funniest little way of wrinkling her nose when she laughed."

Solo was nodding sympathetically when he jerked forward to look down the road toward the creek. Through the rain curtain he could see a knot of riders coming into town. There was a man in the center of the group in a slicker with his arms lashed behind him. They turned into the jail-yard and were gone behind the side of the building.

"What the hell could that be?" snorted Sabin.

Washita Mount came up to the suite of rooms a little later. "Somebody who has something to do with the case, 's all I know," Mount said guardedly when he saw the Kid was present. "A lanky red-faced gent and some pards—it seems he's a friend of Batt's—brought the jasper in."

That would be Red Nichols, Solo knew. He picked up his hat and left. A moment after slapping it on as he went down the hall, he stopped dead in his tracks, shaking some. Reaching up, he removed the sombrero, then went through the motions of slapping it on as he had before. He couldn't be plumb certain. But it seemed as if his right arm was a little stronger, had moved a little quicker. He recalled how Dr. South had said that when the nerve recovered from the unnatural pressure that had pinched it—if it did—he might regain the old-time use of his arms suddenly and completely. The Kid licked his lips and went on out to prowl the town. There was just a chance he might cut Nichols' sign. He simply ignored the fact that if he did, he would still have dead triggers.

BACK IN the room, Mount spat out who the "somebody" they had brought in was. "They got Bill Mays!" The William Mays whose sworn statement had been such a telling blow at the trial.

Even the slick-tongued Bartlett was nonplussed. They simply sat stunned. Lobart slowly lowered the drink he had half raised. Ashen, Sabin sat sucking his breath. Mount stood rubbing his gun butts with his palms.

Lobart finally said, "They couldn't uh found him. . . He hit the trail and kept riding. Those were his orders—from me. . ." Then: "It was that damned Nichols who dug him out of a hole somewheres."

They all knew what it meant. Mays, of course, had perjured himself in that sworn statement. He had a criminal record. And on the witness

stand, they could probably prove he had not been in the Maverick country at the time of the killing. Bartlett had presented the statement, claiming he could not produce the witness in person. The prosecution had produced him. To save his own hide, Mays would tell the truth in court.

Jackson Bartlett smoothed his yellow hair and got up to put on his coat. Lobart asked him where he was going.

"Gentlemen, no lawyer can save a dead man. The defendant is as good as hung right now. And if I tarried to witness the actual ceremony, I might find myself decorating the end of a rope. I am leaving."

Lobart palmed his big face. "Uh-huh. . . And how long do you think it'd take a posse to catch up with you?"

"What do you mean?"

Lobart looked at his hands. "Oh, I don't know. . . Of course, neither Sam nor I had anything to do with getting that statement of Mays'. *We* were surprised—plumb surprised—when you produced it, Bartlett. Sure. Weren't we, Sam? And your disappearance will be an admission of that. Yes-s. . . Oh, well. . ."

Bartlett fell into a chair, one arm in a sleeve of his coat. It was quiet for some moments. Lobart picked up his drink.

"It's simple, Sam, Washita," the Big Man said. "Bill Mays dies. . . How? He is going to be shot by person or persons unknown from outside as he stands at his cell window—some time tonight. . ."

CHAPTER XV

IT WAS SULTRY. Above, the star-studded sky was clear though there was no moon. But the unnatural heat made a man sweat even just walking, and it caused a layer of mist to hang over the earth about waist-height so that a man looked like a legless thing moving atop a milky tide. The Kid himself had a strange feeling as he walked through it. He was following Scar Neck, the man who had been with Kerr the night he died.

Solo had stumbled over him accidentally after stalking the town in vain till late in the night for a sign of Red Nichols. He had been coming down the lane paralleling the main road. Three men passed him coming from the back of the hotel. He glanced over his shoulder when his ears told him they had halted a moment. One of them was lighting up a quirly. The match glow played on the back of another's neck. It had that scar like red paint on it.

Silently the Kid had turned and trailed them. The other two had vanished when he stepped onto a side street after them. Scar Neck went up the main road and into a barroom that was still open. The Kid didn't follow him in; it was too small and his presence would have been noticed. He didn't simply want to jump Scar Neck. He wanted to find out where he holed up, and who the rest of his gun-slick pards—the one who had tried to ambush him his first night in town—were. And then, the next move would be to learn who was paying Scar Neck his shooting wages.

Then the Kid had lost him. Scar Neck went down the alley beside the barroom. Solo cat-footed into it after him, aware it might be a trap and that he would be about helpless if it were. It was to see Scar Neck going off in the saddle from a horse shed behind the place. His cream-hued sombrero and the pinto pony he forked disappeared beyond some trees at the edge of the town.

Bitter at his failure, Solo made his way down the now deserted main road to the creek, strayed along it without thinking where he was going. Then, beyond an abandoned shed-like place, he saw the handful of riders sitting the saddle in a small clearing. One of them had a white sombrero and sat a pinto horse. Scar Neck. Almost at once they moved off, swinging out behind the south side of sprawling Maverick.

THE KID started to run, felt like a fool and drew up, then began to run once more, bearing over to his left. For in the starlight he could see that actually the riders, including

Scar Neck, were not leaving the town. Beyond its fringe to escape notice, they were working along parallel to the back end of it. They moved only at a trot as if to attract as little attention to themselves as possible. Solo Strant hustled along, skirting backyards, darting across the straggling end of a side road, gliding from sheds to bushes and on. His bullet-nicked leg throbbed with the effort, but he was able to move fast despite it.

The riders passed behind a grove of trees. The Kid began to think he had lost Scar Neck again. He was standing next to a clump of scrub growth. A spur tinkled, and a sombrero, then a man's head and shoulders, rose out of the mist only a few yards away. Another man materialized in the same manner; another and another. They were the horsemen, afoot now, working back in on the town via a tiny bed of a dried-up creek. As they stepped out of it they rose in spectrelike fashion out of the ground mist.

As they went by the crouched Kid, he picked out Scar Neck's sombrero. Working out one of his guns and nerving himself desperately to keep it levelled, he fell in a little behind them. They were moving up on the rear of the jailhouse, he realized.

They veered to pass beyond the corner of the jailyard wall. The Kid was forced to stop as one of them dropped off by a boulder to stand guard there and keep open the avenue of retreat. Solo went even wider to detour him. It took some time. He straightened warily from a patch of high grass. They were about midway up along the side wall, some yards back. At once, the Kid noted one of the second-floor windows of the jail, a cell window, seemed lighted. Actually it was the glow from a lantern on the floor of the corridor outside the barred door of the cell. Washita Mount had left the lantern there, very deliberately as planned.

There was a low whistle. One of the band outside the wall called, "Hey, Mays! Mays!" guardedly out of the mist. The whistle was repeated. And after a moment, the head of the prisoner, Mays, pushed up behind the bars of the rectangle of glassless window. In the clear star glow, his bullet-shaped head with the jug-handle ears was clearly outlined. And there was the lantern glow from behind to frame him.

Strant saw one of the band outside wave to hold his attention, and the Kid saw a kneeling man level a carbine barrel over a boulder. Bill Mays was about to be murdered.

PUSHING forward through the ground mist, Solo Strant tried to steady the barrel of his six-gun in his right hand. Grimly struggled to draw bead on the man with the carbine. He gripped the Colts in both hands, a finger fumbling for the trigger.

"Look out, mister! Look out!" he shouted up at the jail window. "They're going to kill—" The rest of it was lost in the roar of two guns, his own and the carbine. The carbine crashed out again and the Kid knew he had missed. He had a split-second glimpse of a blood-stained head sinking behind the bars of the cell window.

A gunman came charging at the Kid. The latter sidestepped as lead droned past an ear. Before he could steady that gun, the man was on him and batted him across the head with his smoking gun barrel. The Kid stumbled into some weeds and went to his knees. There was wild shouting from the main road. Lamplight jumped from the window of the marshal's office out in front of the jailhouse. Then the stunned Kid heard Scar Neck and the other gun-slicks beating it the devil out of there.

Getting to his feet, he tried to retreat hastily himself. Down by the stand of trees back from the jailhouse, the ponies of the murdering bunch went tearing off. Instinct told Solo Strant it would be a bad spot for him to be found in. Every step made his battered skull pound. The next moment, there was a sharper cry that cut through the general uproar from the main road. He turned to see riders slamming around the other back corner of the jail fence. The one in

the van he recognized as Red Nichols.

"Stop, you danged coyote!" Nichols bawled, gun metal glittering in his hand.

The Kid made a play to draw with his left hand, slicing it across his body for the gun butt rigged on his right hip. But once again, he was dead-triggered, as helpless as if he had bulletless weapons. His hand did jump with surprising speed for his holster. But he couldn't get the hogleg shucked free at first.

Then Nichols clipped his hat brim with a slug. And there was nothing for the Kid to do but hoist his dew-claws in the gesture of surrender.

It was all very quick with the red-faced Nichols giving orders quietly. Three other riders swirled around the Kid. One dropped off and appropriated his weapons. Nichols told him to climb into that man's saddle. The man swung up behind Solo. And they went quirting off through the slow-drifting ground mist, crossing a low rise south of the town and then swinging eastward. After a mile, Nichols himself dropped back even with the Kid.

"So *you* gunned that Mays through the jail window, eh. . . I figured something like that would be tried. 'S why me and the boys were drifting around there. Who the hell hired you, Kid."

The Kid denied it, claiming he had tried to stop the shooting. Nichols' harsh laugh was the answer. He made a derisive gesture with the hand that bore Solo's bullet brand.

"We'll find out if we have to bleed it outa you!"

It was about an hour later when they swung into a small arroyo beyond a knoll where two dead pines thrust gaunt tips at the stars. Half a mile up the arroyo, they plunged into a grove of trees to draw up before an old sagging-roofed cabin. Nichols entered first to light a candle stuck in a bottle neck on a rotting table. Then the Kid was ushered in at gun point. Nichols warned his companions not to get careless.

"THIS KID is Satan himself for gun tricks, boys." He dropped onto a box that served as a chair. "Strant, you could bust your lungs a-yelling out here and only the coyotes'd hear you. Let's have it."

The Kid met the steely impact of the other's flinty eyes and did no stalling. Nichols had that hard thing about him found only in men in whom something has died. "Nobody ever hires me, Nichols. You oughta know that."

Nichols' lips pulled tight over his teeth. He watched the smoke mounting from his quirly. "I'm a tough man, Strant. And—I hate to waste time. Sabe? Where is Deaf John Dean?"

"About six foot under, I imagine, Nichols. Dead."

"Liar!" Nichols was standing. And the pistol-like crack of his hand across the Kid's mouth followed hard on the epithet. The Kid attempted to fight back. But his enfeebled arms were grabbed by two of Nichols' men before Solo could more than half start a blow. Very deliberately, Nichols raked him with a backhand blow.

"Now, inasmuch as you insisted upon asking for it. . . Who is behind Sabin?. . . You gotta play tough all the time, Kid?" He stood up again and crashed his fist between the Kid's eyes. Solo and the two holding him were driven back against the wall. Blood spurted from the Kid's nose.

"All right," Nichols went on again. "You're working for Sam Sabin. Your actions prove it. Why did he—and maybe you too—shoot down that Randall over in Iron Hill? Whoever killed him knew he wasn't John Dean—like they pretended. Come on, spit it out."

Despite his icy rage, the Kid was baffled. "Randall?" he repeated. "Pretended he was John Dean. . ."

Rising, Red Nichols drew free a plaited quirt hooked under his belt. His mouth worked like a man tasting something bad. "I'm asking you once more, Kid. Where's Dean?"

Solo shrugged calmly. "I don't know."

"Sure. You ain't working for nobody. You're just hanging your headpiece in this piece of country

because you like the view. Sure." The quirt sang. It took the Kid across the ribs, tearing his black shirt at the seam.

THE BLOW buckled the Kid. He whitened but the sleepy smile, a dangerous sign, spread on his boyish face. Nichols drew back the quirt again. It took the Kid over the chest that time.

"Higher and higher," said Nichols softly. "Higher—" His eyes dropped to the Kid's silver stocked Colts on the old table. He put down the quirt, picked up one of the guns. Then he thumbed out every other shell, leaving three in the chambers. Spinning the chamber slowly, he showed that to the Kid. Then he came around the table.

"Kid, you shot that prisoner, Mays, tonight. You were with the bunch there. And a dead shot like you. . . Anyway, if there was nothing else, that proves you're working with the bunch protecting and hiding Dean."

The Kid didn't waste his breath denying it. He felt the cold round steel-lipped kiss of the gun muzzle against his temple. The man lounging in the other corner galvanized, eyes bugging. It meant Nichols was tightening on the trigger. It came, the thin click of the gun hammer on an empty chamber. No report.

"Empty—that one," Nichols murmured. From outside the chirp of a cricket came clearly. The snap as Nichols eared back the gun hammer. One of the men who had been holding the Kid stepped away, sleeving at a big glistening sweat drop poised on his jutting chin. "Where's John Dean?"

Again the Kid didn't answer the one-time cavalryman and outlaw. The gun muzzle pressed a little harder into the Kid's temple. Candlelight flickered off the silver skull beneath the Kid's jaw. Death breathed on him. Yet a humorous thought struck him. He had always known the day would come when he had to die. But with his own gun. . . Nichols spun the gun chamber.

Nichols triggered. And once more, the hollow click, no crashing explosion which Solo Strant would never have heard. The man in the corner gouged the floor with his spur angrily; he wasn't vicious, he just wanted the dirty job done with.

"Dean, Strant. . . .Tell us?" Nichols' voice was cracked as he pulled the gun back an inch from the Kid's temple. He didn't want to kill Solo Strant, this man he had always admired.

The Kid smiled faintly. "I was going to promise to settle the score with you some day, Nichols. But now, my future plans are sorta uncertain."

NICHOLS swore horasely and snapped the gun back against the Kid's head after flipping the chamber around once more. By the law of averages alone, the Kid was overdue to die. Every man in the room knew it. Twice the hammer had failed to land on a cartridge. This time—

"Aim straight, Red," the Kid said sarcastically. "And cut a big notch on the gun butt for this one. But you can never say you had the nerve to do it on a face-to-face even draw. 'Course, mebbe you will do some lying about what a nervy gent you are and. . . ." The Kid felt the gun twitch against his flesh. He knew Nichols delayed cocking the hammer. His words were getting under Nichols hide because Nichols himself hated doing it this way.

"Shut up," he said through tight teeth.

And the Kid was around, twisting as he ducked, ripping his right arm free of the man standing behind. In the same moment, Solo snatched one of Nichols' Colts from the latter's holster. It was so reckless, with the gun nosing his head a moment before, it cught them flat-footed. He had the gun out of Nichols' holster before they quite realized it.

As he stepped back with it, swinging unsteadily and the muzzle dipping, his weak unsure finger fumbled around the trigger guard. He was unable to get the finger on the trigger. Red Nichols saw. At first he

couldn't believe what he saw. His flinty eyes leaped to the backing Kid's face and saw it corroborated there.

Nichols did a peculiar thing. He threw the Kid's weapon, that he had been threatening him with, onto the table, leaped forward a couple of strides and easily snatched the Colts from the Kid's weak hand. And there was no gloating on Red Nichols' face.

"Something's happened to you, Strant. You're no gunslinger any more," Nichols stated in the tight silence.

"That means," he went on, "you couldn't have shot Mays in jail—or had anything to do with it. No, you couldn't. . . ."

CHAPTER XVI

THE KID'S eyes shuttered once and twisted in his head. He stood like a guilty shamed man. To him the hardest thing to take was pity. It wrenched his heart to stand there and know that he lived by the grace of Red Nichols. That to Nichols he was like a crippled animal, inferior and to be spared.

Nichols said, "Lord!" reverently. "The great Silver Kid—" The other hree stood staring.

Pounding hoofbeats smote the night. The other three were outside the shack in a couple of seconds and slipping into the brush. Nichols started to snuff the candle, realized its light would have already been spotted, and jumped behind the open door.

"Git down under the table, Kid. There may be gunning," he called. "Git outa sight—please!"

The rider was heading right for the grove. He reined up just beyond the ray of light from the half-open door. "My uncle was with Sam Houston at the Alamo," he sang out loudly. It was the password. Then he came riding ahead slowly.

"All right, Packy," said Nichols coming from behind the door. "What—"

"Hell's going to pop, boys," broke in Packy excitedly. "Some gent was here in the arroyo and must uh seen you head in. He hit town and passed the word. They think we're the ones who drilled the prisoner. Batt himself is at the head of the posse. They was only a little behind when I cut into the arroyo here."

NICHOLS swore. "Batt's against me now, eh. . . ." He looked back at the Kid in the lighted cabin once. Then he was running for his pony. He and his men were gone in a matter of moments, quirting out of the other end of the stand of trees. The Kid went in and retrieved his guns from the table. A few minutes later, a bullet whistled in the open doorway. The Kid was standing outside the cabin in the darkness. He answered the hail and the posse came out of the trees from three sides. Batt strode at Solo bellicosely.

"What the devil are you doing here, Strant?"

The Kid told him what had happened. At the finish, the judge was raking his iron-gray hair nervously. "Hell, that Nichols couldn't have done it! He couldn't—" Then he remembered the possemen around him. "How do we know you didn't have a hand in it, Strant?" he rasped.

The Kid thumbed at his battered face. "Aren't you trailing Nichols for gunning the gent in the jail, Batt? Then if I did it, why should they punch me around?"

The baffled Holy Ben scratched his jaw. "We ain't sure who we're tracking. You *say* it was Nichols here but—"

"I didn't say him and his bunch did the shooting," the Kid cut him off calmly. He told him who had, what he had witnessed.

More baffled than ever, Batt still scrutinized the Kid with stern suspicion. "Nichols wanted something out of you?"

"Yep. He wanted to know where Deaf John Dean was?"

"But Dean—" Again Batt clamped up his jaw on what he had been about to say. He knew that, according to Red Nichols, Dean was not dead, but

he couldn't reveal that he had dealt with a man supposed to be an outlaw. He lowered his gun from bearing on the Kid, thought a moment, then roared orders to the posse to get after Nichols. He knew it was an empty gesture. But as an officer of the Law, he had to make it. . . .

UP IN Sabin's hotel room, Washita Mount gouged his heels into the carpet as he strode about angrily. "That damn Kid broke it up! Your men," he jerked his head at Lobart. "would have blown that Mays' brains outa the back of his head if Strant hadn't hadda step inta the picture!"

Sabin shrugged. "Well, Mays is badly shot up. The sawbones say he may not live. Too weak to talk. They won't be able to put him on the stand to testify right away, at least. We're safe for a spell anyways."

"He should uh been dead if things had gone right," Mount insisted. "I warned ya there'd be no good in bringing him inta it."

Sabin cursed him lazily, sure of himself. "Having the Kid to use to testify was the biggest thing in that case!"

Jackson Bartlett and Lobart nodded, agreeing. "Of course, I don't mind reminding you it was I who figured out how to use him like that!" Bartlett added.

"Say, Scar Reed told me something," Mount remembered, mentioning the boss of the gun-slicks brought in by Big Man Lobart. "Don't know how much there is to it. But he said the Kid had some trouble handling his hoglegs. He said the Kid shot like there was something the matter with his arms. Scar said he was very slow."

A little later, one of the gun guards stepped in to say the Kid himself was coming up. Sabin warned them to act as if they knew nothing about the role the Kid had played. Sabin was the first to jump up at the sight of the Kid's punch-smashed face.

"Holy blazes, Kid! What happened?"

The Kid told his story, on guard himself. The whole town roused by the shooting at the jail, had been out on the streets when he returned. He had learned that it was Bill Mays who had been shot in his cell. Mays' presence there mystified him.

"That danged Nichols!" Sabin snorted with simulated wrath. "He'll pay for this. Here!" He gave the Kid a drink.

Solo downed it and was putting the glass on the table. Sabin's right hand stabbed out and grabbed the Kid's nearer gun without removing it from the holster. The Kid's right hand flipped across his body to that holster, but the movement was sluggish and unsure.

Sabin pulled the gun half up, then tamped it back down into the holster, grinning. "Just seeing how fast you are, Kid. . . . 'Course, you're among friends and not on your guard." But he knew. . . .

NEXT morning when court opened, following the shooting of the night before, the town was seething like a cauldron over the trail. The road before the town hall was choked solid with people. Sam Sabin's men had to literally drive a wedge through it to get the boss and his companions to the doors. Rumors were everywhere, but Sabin knew that the wounded Bill Mays still lived.

Holy Ben Bat entered the courtroom and climbed up on his volume-bolstered chair. His posse had not caught sight of Nichols last night. Bartlett prancing triumphantly beside him, "Henry Gregg" the prisoner, was brought, in by old Marshal Bengoll. Costello, haggard looking, rose and made a plea for further adjournment. The surprise witness of the prosecution, Mays, was in a precarious condition, he said. Bartlett flashed his diamond cuff links and stepped before the bench, protesting any thought of further delay.

"How much longer do you wish to keep this innocent defendant in jail?" he demanded impassionately. "Look at him, wounded himself!" Gregg shifted his wounded leg os-

tensibly, using his hands to lift the knee. "A jail-weary, mild man who only asks to be allowed to go his way, Your Honor. The prosecutor has not proven his case against his wrongly-charged victim. . . ."

Gregg bent his greasy head in a gesture of humility as coached by his lawyer, he put his hands flat on the table before him. Seated off at an angle behind him, the Kid could see his hands plainly in the sunlight slanting through the windows. Could see the glitter of the sun off that broad-banded ring on Gregg's finger, a ring he had not worn before during the trial. The sight of it rang a bell in the Kid's brain.

It was a gesture of triumph on Gregg's part, as if he were confident he was out of danger. But to the Kid it brought back the island in the swamp and Dr. South's daughter, Rosalia. She too had worn a broad gold ring. Quickly the Kid swung to his feet and pressed up close to the rope serving as a railing so that he could look over the prisoner's shoulder.

Gregg shifted his hand, fisted it, then spread it flat again. And Solo saw that that ring bore the same engraving of a writhing snake as did Rosalia South's ring.

THE KID was halfway down the aisle to the front doors as Batt, after listening to the doctor treating Mays, granted an adjournment of three days. The crowd buzzed with fresh excitement as Little Jackson Bartlett tore at his yellow hair as he protested in vain against the delay. Solo glanced back over his shoulder and saw Mount, looking his way, going out the side door at the other end of the hall.

After slowly working his way through the throng on the walk, the Kid got half a block when his elbow was nudged. It was the foot-dragging, doglike Vetters, Big Man Lobart's bodyguard. He gestured toward a horse and buggy drawn up in the shade of a eucalyptus. Lobart was sitting in the rig.

"Howdy, my friend, howdy," he sang out loudly. "Just dropped through town and heard about the trial," he added for the benefit of folks around. "Say-y. . . .Where are you headed, Strant?" He lowered his voice as the Kid stepped over.

The Kid felt like telling him to mind his own business. But he wanted to get away without any trouble. He gave him a story about spotting one of Nichols' men riding by the window and intending to try to pick up his trail. Lobart gave him a patronizing pat on the back.

"That's the stuff, Kid! Mebbe you can find out who shot up Mays last night too."

The Kid got his pony saddled up down at the livery barn and left Maverick. He didn't know the answer to things yet. But somehow, the supposedly dead Deaf John Dean was tied into it, the man Red Nichols said was not dead. Solo would have bet even money on a hunch he had. But then, this prisoner, Gregg, wasn't deaf. Solo had seen him jerk his head around in the courtroom the other day when a spectator had mentioned Dean's name. And then there was that ring Gregg was wearing. It simply didn't fit the picture that this alleged friendless prisoner; a nobody according to Sam Sabin, shouldn't be connected with the girl out in the swamp. It was strange too that the penniless Gregg should be able to afford two such rings like that.

The Kid's thoughts ran that way as he rode toward Iron Hill.

That ring reminded him of how, when he had lain half conscious near the house in the swamp, he had heard as if in a dream a man talking to Rosalia South. *And that man had promised her,* it all came back to him now, *that Deaf John Dean would be saved.* That was proof that Dean must be still alive. The Kid cudgelled his memory to try and place the voice of that man; it had seemed so tantalizingly familiar at the time. He touched the flanks of the paint horse impatiently with his dull-rowelled spurs.

He was going to Iron Hill to investigate the death of Deaf John Dean, the alleged death of Dean. . . .

CHAPTER XVII

THE BLANKET of night lay over Iron Hill. The Kid had had no trouble finding out where somebody identified as John Dean had been killed. The barroom on the little road bending south out of town was pointed out to him as if it were a historic spot. There were just three customers when he drifted in. The bald-headed barkeep was busy regaling two of them with his oft-repeated account of how he had gotten Dean. Solo was kept waiting for his drink. The barkeep was very condescending, suffused with his own importance.

The Kid stalled around an hour until the last of the customers had trailed off. He and the drink wrangler were alone. "Heard Deaf John Dean—" the Kid began.

"Was shot right smack-dab over there," the barkeep cut in eagerly. "You can see that faded bloodstain on the floor. . . .I was polishing some glasses when I looked up and seen this tough hairpin. I says I myself, I says—"

The Kid's voice was a purr. But it drove like steel into the other's consciousness. "Friends of the dead man are in town. . . .Mad, too. I'd hate to be in the boots of the gent who drilled him. Yep. . . ."

The bar boss went green around the gills and fumbled the glass he was polishing. The Kid could almost see his mind working. During the next ten minutes, the man mopped his face and his half bald head almost steadily. Solo left. He was waiting down the road when the last light went out and the barkeep locked up the front door. The man toted the double-barrelled shotgun from behind the bar with him as he headed home. It was a little shack at the edge of town.

Down from it the Kid waited perhaps an hour. He had determined on a campaign on the barkeep's nerves to break him down. The way the Kid figured it, there was something peculiar about the slaying of the man taken for John Dean. A man like Dean, a big potato of an outlaw, wouldn't logically be wasting his time holding up a two-bit barroom like that place. And it was inconceivable that the drink wrangler alone had blasted down the man who had died. Slipping in, the Kid used a gun butt to pound savagely on the door of the shack, then glided off.

THE DOOR never opened. From inside came the bartender's voice, quavering and thin with terror as he asked who was there. About noontime the next day, the Kid visited the barroom again. The barkeep had big hollows beneath his eyes. He looked even more haunted when he saw Solo. The latter said it sure was one beautiful day. The drink wrangler looked as if he never expected to know another beautiful day.

"Those old pards of John Dean's are still around," the Kid announced casually. "They're working on the hunch that no one man could uh got Dean. They say there must uh been two or three in on it." He saw the barkeep's mouth jer. "They aim to get them all. The way they got it figured, one of the killer's nerves will break and he'll try to slope outa town. Then they'll grab him. First man who runs will be as good as confessing."

The other splashed redeye over the bar counter as he poured the Kid's second drink. "S-say, ain't ya the famous Silver Kid?"

Solo smiled vaguely. "Could be, I reckon."

"Wel—uh—"

The Kid got stern. "Yeah, I know these men are outlaws. But I believe in justice for all, no matter whether a man's a parson or an owlhooter. And the way I hear it, this Dean never had a square chance. They practically ambushed him—some old enemies of his."

"N-no. It wasn't th-that way. I—they—" The barkeep went down to the other end of the counter hurriedly.

In the middle of the drowsy afternoon, Solo paid him another visit. He said he had heard the barkeep was in on the shooting. The man looked as if he were going to sink

from sight. He took a double snort of redeye himself before he answered.

"Kid, there was just a heap of gunning. Me, now I ain't sure exactly how it happened." He tried to wink knowingly, said he had been doing quite a heap of sampling of the stock that evening. "I'd stepped out back and was just comin' in when the banging started." He said that he had run behind the bar and grabbed a gun to try to break up things. "Don't know what I hit exactly. . .As a matter of fact, I wounded one of the gents as he ran off. I—uh—I always—uh—sorta admired that Dean 'cause he was one nervy gent, th-they said."

"There sure seems a heap of different versions around this pueblo about how it happened," the Kid said enigmatically and left.

HE WAS watching from cover outside when the barman began to close up early that evening. The Kid barged in as if he were half orey-eyed, greeting the man in a loud hearty voice. Ignored it when the man said he was closing up; demanded a drink.

"Wanta be let in on a secret?" he asked the man confidentially. "These men who're in town—the ones I told ya about before. . . ."

The bartender said, "Uh-huh." He was having a shot himself. He actually was pretty well liquored up, having been bolstering his ragged nerves with redeye steadily throughout the day. He was bleeding perspiration.

"They aren't really John Dean's friends, Manders." Manders was the barkeep's handle as he had learned in the town.

Manders sucked for air like a fish with brief relief.

"They're the pards of the man who was killed," the Kid went on enigmatically.

"Wh-what? I don't savvy th-that. I shot—it *was* Dean who was killed!"

"Nope, amigo. I happen to know who it was that was really killed here, and it wasn't Deaf John Dean. These gents know who it was too. . . . You see, that's why they're so danged riled up. Their pard—the man who was killed—was no lobo. He was just a poor innocent fool. That's why they are so plumb set on gitting who was responsible—*all* of 'em."

Once again the Kid left the poor tortured devil. But when the man headed homeward, toting a bottle as well as the shotgun, the Kid drifted from a side path and joined him. Manders turned off toward the heart of the town, veering away from his own shack. He was headed for a friend's place.

The Kid broke off his whistling. "These fellas—they're watching every gent involved for some suspicious move. . . .They don't aim to punish an innocent man. But—shucks, can you blame 'em for having proddy trigger fingers? One move, they say. . . ."

With a sigh, Manders changed his course and went on down toward his shack. The Kid left him. But half an hour later, he was prowling about the place and he sent three slugs driving into it, shattering one window. He steadied his hogleg with two hands when he did it. And he was back in a stand of trees on a knoll beyond the shack when some men hurried down from the main road to investigate. He had his pony ground-anchored up there.

The terrified broken-spirited Manders lurched into the doorway and swore he hadn't heard anything. He was afraid to admit his danger lest it might look like an admission, one of those suspicious moves the Kid had warned him about. The men went away.

HEAVY clouds had blotted out the moon and the stars a little later when the Kid took his slicker from the saddle roll and donned it. He was just adjusting his neckerchief over his face when he thought he caught the snapping of a twig nearby. He was wheeling, crouched, with his Colts in his hands in a split second. He shifted over to a stump and studied the night from behind it. A night bird fluttered away from a

nearby piece of brush. The Kid figured the bird could have caused the sound. Then his eyes bulged as he looked down at his guns.

A few minutes later he was at the door of Manders' place, face masked and rig hidden by the slicker, knocking lightly.

"Manders," he called when there was no answer. "It's the Kid. I came to warn you."

There was a footstep right on the other side of the door and the bar slid back. Solo jammed a gun muzzle into the bartender's middle as he opened up. The latter let his own Colts clatter on the floor.

"So you thought your friend, the Kid, could save you, Manders," snarled the Kid, disguising his voice. It was hardly necessary. Manders was too drunken and eaten by gnawing fear to recognize him with the slicker on. The Kid's crafty war of nerves had broken him.

"D-don't—don't shoot! I never meant to kill him—h-honest," Manders blubbered away. He reeled against the table, almost knocking off the low-turned lamp. His eyes twisted wildly around the dingy place with its blanket-masked windows.

"Your only chance to save your hide is to talk," the Kid warned, speaking from behind the neckerchief covering the bottom half of his face. "How did you know it was John Dean?"

Manders protested he hadn't. Actually, he didn't know what this John Dean looked like. Somebody had told him afterward it was Dean. When the Kid asked who had told him that, thick-bodied Manders, quaking like an aspen, pawed at his slack-lipped mouth.

"My pards are all around the place," the Kid warned. "Talk pronto afore we take you for a little pasear to our hideout where we can work you over good."

Manders made a small animal-like sound of terror. "I don't know his name. I—honest—d-don't. It was that big politician fella."

The Kid thought of Big Man Lobart. "He helped kill him?"

Manders' wobbling head shook weakly. "I—I d-don't think so anyways." In pure desperation he got a grip on himself. He told how this man had tried to hold up the place, and how one man had shot him in the back from outside the window. And then about the man who had walked in from the back and blasted the hold-up man beyond recognition.

"Who was that one?" the Kid demanded. His gun hammer eared back with an ominous click. "If you hope to save your hide, fella. . . ."

MANDERS gave a dry sob. He had never clapped eyes on the man before. In the excitement he hadn't really gotten a good look at him. He said he was stocky, dark-haired. The Kid wondered if he had run into a dead end. Manders was telling all he knew. But it didn't seem enough.

The Kid recalled the night he had encountered Washita Mount and Sam Sabin. They had told him they had been in Iron Hill. And Sabin had known the supposed John Dean was dead within a short time after it had happened. The Kid said:

"Listen. You got one chance to stay breathing, Manders. Listen close." And he described Sam Sabin carefully.

Manders began to nod. "Y-yes," he said. "I've seen a gent like that. Come t-to think of it—he was in the barroom earlier that day before the gunning. Yes, he was, I know. It comes back to me. And *he* was the one who came in from the back and blasted Dean—or whoever it was—now I remember."

The Kid grabbed him by the front of his shirt that was wet with sweat despite the chill of the night. "Would you know him if you came face to face with him again? Could you point him out at sight? Remember, though, his life will depend on it."

Manders wiped his mouth and it tightened some. "Now that you've described him, mister, things come back to me I didn't know I knew.

I'd know this gent all right. And I'll t-tell yuh something else. Now that things come back, I remember seeing this same gent one time when I was over to Maverick. . . ."

That was the clincher. It proved Manders, frantic, wasn't just grabbing at straws and pretending to save his own hide. It proved he really had seen the man Solo described, Sam Sabin.

Gravel grated beneath a boot. The Kid swivelled around in his tracks. Whoever was outside was beyond sight. The noise had been made deliberately. In the next instant, Solo Strant realized that.

"Move—and you'll never know it," said Red Nichols tightly from the window across the room at the right. The Kid cut his eyes over his shoulder, making no play because he knew there was a man just outside the door who would have him in the back if he did.

Red-faced Nichols and another were just outside the open window. They had shoved back the blanket and their guns jutted into the room. The Kid pushed up his hands slowly. The man outside the door stepped in quickly. He was tubby and short-armed and had to stretch up to get the Kid's raised gun. He hooked the other out of the Kid's holster. Nichols ran around to the doorway. He said grimly:

"About to cash his chips for him, eh, Strant?"

CHAPTER XVIII

FURY PALED the Kid whose face still bore the marks of his last meeting with Red Nichols. Just one thought drove through the Kid's usually icily calm mind. He *did* have a bitter score to settle with this red-faced man with the dull red hair, but he was puzzled by the man's remark.

Nichols followed it up. "That boss of yours, Sabin, he never misses a bet. I gotta hand it to him. Figured I might come snooping around so he sent you to find out how much this dupe knew, eh?"

The Kid had control of himself again. His personal feud with Nichols was shoved into the background before the problem of solving the Deaf John Dean mystery. "Nichols, why are you after Dean? You're a one-time lobo yourself."

"Vengeance," Nichols said stiffly, puzzled himself now by the turn of the Kid's conversation. "You could call it that." He gestured with the hand that bore the kid's bullet brand; he had holstered his gun.

"If we take Manders back to Maverick and have him point out the killer of the man who died here as John Dean—"

"It was Randall, his brother," put in Nichols.

"All right. If we take this Manders back and he hangs the deadwood on Sabin as the killer—then what?"

Light leaped in Nichols' flinty eyes. "He'd be jailed—up for murder. And he'd talk—yes—talk to save his own hide. He must know where Dean is and—"

The Kid had made his move. As once before his silver-stocked guns lay on the table. And Solo had plucked the .41 Gambler's Special, that Lobart had sent to him by Vetters the opening day of the trial, from his waistband. Figuring the Kid's hands about useless for any sudden gunplay anyway, Nichols was caught asleep at the switch. The little gun was denting his hard belly before he quite realized it.

The Kid winked at Nichols two pards. "Want to bet I can't trigger if you drill me?" he purred.

Nichols swore very softly under his breath. His eyes never wavered though. The Kid smiled sleepily and told him to order his guntoters outside.

"We got something to settle, Nichols. Just you and me. . . .I won't kill you—while they're still outside." The bartender's scared squeak put a period on the Kid's cool statement.

Nichols nodded to his men. They took Manders with them. The Kid studied Nichols' face and saw no sign of fear there.

"Our personal score can wait—till

we find John Dean," Solo said finally. He tossed the .41 onto the table, leaving himself unarmed. "That oughta prove how I'm playing it, Nichols. We can go back to Maverick—and play it together. . . ."

SABIN was not in town, having gone out to the ranch, when the Kid and Nichols and party returned to Maverick the next day. It was raining when he did ride in late in the afternoon. He came into the hotel with the collar of his coat up and his sombrero brim slapped down low over his face. A man went up to Sabin and the Kid overheard him say:

"The sawbones says that Bill Mays will be able to appear in court to testify tomorrow, Sabin."

Sabin seemed taken aback, then had a smug smile as if he knew a secret. "Well, well. 'S fine. He'll corroborate that statement, I can assure you, my friend." He was peeling off his white gauntlets, glanced down at the half-healed cut on his right hand left by the Kid's bullet that night, and chuckled as he nodded to the Kid lounging against a post in the lobby. "Any luck on your manhunt, Strant?"

Solo shrugged and went over. Four of Sabin's hired holster specialists closed in a little tighter around the boss. The hawk-eyed Solo noted a half dozen more who drifted in as casually as possible after him. Sam Sabin had come to town well protected.

"Can't say I found my man yet," the Kid told Sabin. "But I've got a lead that may take me to him sooner or later."

"Aw, forget about that Nichols, Kid," Sabin said genially as he pulled off the dripping sombrero. "The last hand is coming up and we hold the top ace, boy, the top ace. Just got word from the Big Man to come in. He's got something that—well, that can swing the whole trial pronto. That Nichols is small bore stuff, I tell ya." He told the Kid to come on upstairs.

Solo said he'd make it later. Said he was keeping an eye cocked on a gent who seemed suspicious. Sabin pursed his lips and then went on toward the stairs. It was plain from his attitude that the Kid was not important to their plans any longer. The Kid cut his eyes across the lobby to the dimness of a small corridor that gave onto a side entrance. Manders, the barkeep from Iron Hill was there with one of Nichols' men. And Manders gave the Kid a slow deliberate nod, the signal he had awaited. Sabin's removal of his hat as he paused had been just enough. Manders had identified him, the killer of Randall, the gent supposed to be John Dean.

The Kid went out on the porch, burned down a quirly to a coal, made certain he wasn't being followed as he started along the road in the wet twilight. Then he turned up an alley to emerge on the three-shrouded lane running behind the main street. He went along it a little way.

"My uncle was at the Alamo."

"With Sam Houston," the Kid completed it, and Nichols detached himself from a tree trunk and came to the edge of the lane. He had already gotten word of Mander's recognition of Sabin as the killer. They talked it over a few minutes.

"I'm still rated an outlaw in the eyes of most men," Nichols stated. He had told the Kid the story of his pardon en route back from Iron Hill. "If we tried to jump him, well, he'd have plenty a-backing his play."

"AFRAID of odds?" the Kid twitted him. The moment of silence was like a hard thing between them. Both were strong men, ruthless when pushed. The Kid could never forget how the heavy-handed Nichols had banged him around. Though he no longer hit the owlhoot, Nichols at heart was against anything representing the Law. And to him, if anything, Solo Strant was more of an enemy instinctively because he wore no badge and the Law was not his business. Not officially, at least.

"Reckon I could get him off alone and flush him with a quick gun," the

Kid said. "Then I could march him over to the jail and—"

Nichols' head was shaking. He backhanded a raindrop from his nose. He still wasn't trusting the Kid too far. "That Washita Mount, the deputy marshal. . . .he has access to the jail. He could—well, pull a trick."

The Kid shrugged. There was some truth in that possibility. "Best thing, then, is to take Manders out to Batt's place and have him make a statement. I'm pretty sure Batt is still on the square."

They agreed upon that. "We want Sabin alive—so he can talk and tell us where we'll find Dean."

The Kid was about to speak, then stuck his quirly in his mouth instead. Perhaps he held his silence because he didn't quite trust Nichols completely. He wasn't certain himself. He had been about to say he thought he could point out where Deaf John Dean was holed up without going very far. But his saying so was no proof. If he had gone and pointed him out, it was just possible the man's true identity might never be revealed.

"You were going to say something, Strant?"

The Kid shrugged, fingering the silver skull at his throat. It would sound locoed anyway, he decided. Dean was prematurely white-haired. On top of that, the hombre he still felt could be Dean was not deaf, as he had learned. And Dean was.

"All right. That's how she is then. Batt can put Sabin under arrest and then we know we'll have him alive for sure." He added that if the Kid wanted to get word to him he was to go see the house guard in the honky tonk at the corner before the jailhouse. Metcalfe was the man's name. They parted, Nichols to meet his men and to take Manders out to the judge's house.

The Kid headed back for the hotel and Sabin's suite. Solo caught his fingers massaging the skull beneath his jaw again and jerked his hand away angrily. He paused once in the darkness to study that hand, lifted the other, then experimented in the cold thinning rain. He went on again, checking things in his mind. Of one thing he was now positive.

Not only was Sabin a killer playing a tricky deep game. But that prisoner, Gregg, his protege, was somehow connected with the undead, missing Deaf John Dean. Again the Kid caught his hand at the skull at his throat. It irritated him. As things looked now, the final moves were cut and dried. And it didn't appear as if it would be a gunpowder payoff.

"But Sabin and Gregg and John Dean are hooked together somehow," he told himself as he mounted the hotel stairs. "How. . . ."

CHAPTER XIV

BIG MAN Lobart wasn't in the rooms upstairs when he got there. It came out that he hadn't been there when Sabin arrived either.

"He's slipped out to see Holy Ben Batt in some quiet place: That's the message he left," Sabin told the Kid. "Which means this trial is as good as over." He refused to amplify on that.

Sabin was in the best of humor. He kept rubbing his hands and kept a glass well filled. Occasionally he went into an adjoining room, closing the door after him. The Kid noticed a slim person in there wearing a red silk shirt and a big shadowing Mex sombrero. The wearer was no Mexican though. Solo figured it must be some new gunslinger of Sabin's.

As the evening lengthened, the rain petered out all together. The Kid drifted out a couple of times. All kinds of tales and rumors were rampant in the town. The Kid tried to straighten out things in his own mind. In the grim game of trying to locate John Dean, both he and Nichols had failed to mention Mays, the prisoner in the jail who had been shot. To Solo, it didn't make sense that the prosecution intended to put him on the stand unless he was going to repudiate his sworn statement.

Yet that possibility did not seem to alarm Sam Sabin in the least.

When the Kid went up to the rooms again, Big Man Lobart had returned. He waved to the Kid as he stepped into the next room with Sabin. Again the Kid glimpsed the figure in the red shirt. Vetters, Lobart's shadow, lounged against the closed door and looked over the Kid with veiled mockery in his face. He, too, had heard how the Kid had lost his wizardry with his Colts.

JACKSON BARTLETT bustled in, knotting his cravat, eyes still sleep-heavy from a nap. Vetters passed the word in and the lawyer was called into the next room. Washita Mount was the next to appear.

"It's all over," he told the Kid. "I saw Lobart on his way into town. Gregg will go free—not saying how. But he will."

"How about that Nichols who's gunning for Sabin?" the Kid prodded him. Mount snickered. Then the door opened and the trio re-emerged from the other room. They looked like three smug cats.

Lobart poured himself a drink, gulped half of it, then said piously, for the Kid's benefit, "Well, we saved Gregg all right."

"Batt going to call off the trial—or what?"

Sabin said, "There just isn't going to be any prisoner to try by tomorrow morning." And they all laughed. Lobart dropped on the arm of a chair to explain to the Kid. "I've been investigating Batt's background, you see, Strant. And up in the state capital, they always say that when the Big Man goes a-digging, he never fails to come up with something. I traced Holy Ben back to before he came to Maverick. He's got something in his past he'll pay plenty to hide, my friend."

"You mean—mean that Batt was ever—" The Kid was dumbfounded.

"Not Ben himself," Sabin put in gleefully. "But Ben Batt had a son who went bad. Tad was his name. A wild redhead, it seems. He hit the trail with a pack of owlhooters."

"That's a tough one for a man like Judge Batt," the Kid said.

Lobart laughed deeply. "Sure is. Reckon that's why he has always hated outlaws so much. . . .Well, we picked up Tad Batt."

"What?"

"Yep. That's why I met him at the house of a friend of his out in the hills. Told him we can bring Tad into town. We had him there with us. He's been riding under the name of Gleason for years. Wanted for a killing in Montana and another up at Injun Bench. Batt gave in."

"Gave in? How?"

"Don't git riled up, Kid."

Lobart sneered thinly Solo's way. "This is how it is. Me and Batt made a deal. His son goes free—and the facts about him are kept a secret. And—uh—Gregg goes outa that jail tonight."

The Kid got it. "You mean, Gregg is going to be allowed to escape tonight."

"Uh-huh. Batt's going to send Marshal Bengoll out of town on a wild goose chase. Then Batt will take care of those special deputies of the Law and Order Committee. And we walk Gregg outa jail late tonight." Lobart finished off his drink as if there were no argument about the thing.

Sabin passed the Kid a glass. "Remember, Kid, this is to save an innocent man. An innocent man. Mebbe it ain't exactly according to Law—ha-ha." He was a little drunk. "But—"

"But he was going to be exonerated in court."

Bartlett smiled but his ferretlike eyes were sharp. "We *thought* so, Strant. I knew I'd broken the prosecution's case. Oh yes. But we learned they grabbed that Mays and were going to make him repudiate his statement by holding something over him. . . .a false charge by the way, too."

THE KID put on a wide grin. He lifted his glass in a toast. "Well, here's to the freed prisoner—the innocent man!" he cried enthusiastical-

ly. The Kid was acting. He wasn't forgetting the fact that Sabin was a killer, the man who had slain Randall and passed him off as Dean.

They had some more drinks. When Solo picked up his hat, Sam Sabin asked him where he was headed. The Kid enigmatically stated his own job wasn't finished.

Lobart was telling the lawyer, "You should have seen Holy Ben Batt shaking in his boots and standing there with tears in his damn eyes!" He laughed. He seemed to have forgotten the Kid's existence.

Sabin said to the Kid at the door. "That Nichols? And supposing you find him and—say, Strant, sometimes I think you're locoed." He was thinking about the Kid's useless gun hands.

Without seeming to head there purposefully, the Kid went down to the honky tonk near the jail and found Metcalfe, the house guard. It was all important that he find Nichols pronto and inform him of the turn things had taken. But the news was bad; Metcalfe had had word from Nichols all right. It was that Nichols had gone out to the cabin in the arroyo where they had taken the Kid that time. Something must have gone wrong.

Leaving, the Kid was glad he had made the visit to the honky tonk seem aimless. For he picked out Vetters, Lobart's bodyguard, back in the throng. Solo turned into a dark side street. When the limping Vetters came around into it, the Kid stepped from behind a tree and bent his gun barrel over Vetters' forehead and eased his sacklike body out of sight beside the steps of a store. Then the Kid made tracks for the livery barn and got his pony and lit out for Nichols' camp. Things had taken an abrupt twist. This matter that had looked about closed up was far from it. Blood was due on the moon.

AS THE paint horse stretched belly up the trail, the Kid thought he knew what had happened. Somehow Nichols had missed the judge. Perhaps Batt had not yet returned from his secret meeting with Lobart. A low moon was crawling through the dissipating cloud rack over the smooth-topped hills in the south when he turned into the arroyo. Outside the cabin he gave the Alamo password. The candle was relighted inside and Nichols saluted him from the door. And the Kid got the shock of his life.

"Yes, I saw Batt," Nichols told him. The ex-cavalryman stroked his nose. "Something's wrong. I don't know exactly. . . ."

"Where's that barkeep, Manders?"

"Left him at Batt's place. You know, the judge wasn't impressed at all." He told it. Batt, at times, had acted as if none of them were present. He had said Manders had a criminal record, that he had done time for shooting a man down in the Panhandle. It was true. So, Batt had claimed, Manders' testimony would be of doubtful value.

"I still don't savvy how he acted," Nichols went on. He was bitter with disappointment. Batt had also stated they had no conclusive proof the man shot down in the Iron Hill barroom was not Deaf John Dean. "Hell, that Sabin is a killer. And he's getting away with it, by grab!"

The Kid understood what had happened to Holy Ben Batt. Batt would have sneered at any physical threat to himself. He would have walked barefoot through hellfire itself to uphold his beloved Law. But to have himself revealed as a man with a son who was an outlaw—that was what had broken him. It would have blasted his reputation as literally holier than ordinary mortals, as one above the common herd. It had even outweighed the threat of the murder charge he could hold over Sabin.

"I don't savvy that—all the way," Nichols said when the Kid paused in his explanation. "He must have known Sabin would crack and—"

And the Kid's trigger-sharp brain had it. Even the threat of a murder charge couldn't have cracked Sam Sabin because there was something he was more afraid of. "That Gregg is the missing Dean!"

"What?"

The Kid smiled sleepily over the twin streamers of quirly smoke from his nostrils as the cabin itself seemed to galvanize. "This is how it *must* be. . . .Listen. Sabin killed a man for no reason—except that he had deliberately built him up as John Dean. Why? Because Dean was in a position of danger—but his true identity unknown."

"Could be," admitted Nichols.

"Then we have Sabin and Lobart and Mount working like mad to save an apparently unknown two-bit, this fella called Gregg. . . .That just doesn't make sense—unless Gregg is somebody else. . . .the missing Deaf John Dean."

NICHOLS rose from the box. "And Dean holds something over Sabin and company? Yes, by grab! That's it. Now—"

"And therefore Batt must have been told by Lobart who Gregg really is. Batt always was a fanatic—and now he's gone plain locoed!"

"What do we do?"

"Get Manders back. Rush him back into town and break the story about Sabin. He's ringed in by his gun-slicks but when that town rises up and—"

Nichols shook his head sadly. They couldn't get Manders. Nichols had gone back to re-argue the matter with Batt half an hour after leaving. Batt had told him he had sent Manders down to the jailhouse. The Kid swore softly.

"Sent him to jail—hell! You can bet that that Manders is killing a good pony gitting outa this country now. There's only one thing left, Red. . . .We got to break up that jail break ourselves."

Nichols' eyes swung to the Kid's silver-stocked guns, then to his hands. "You got the nerve to try it—under the conditions?"

The Kid yanked open the door. "They may be pulling it even now. . . .You know the one about locking the barn after the pony's gone. . . ."

CHAPTER XX

IT WAS long after midnight when they neared the outskirts of Maverick. The night was still, the town bedded down for the night. Then they came out of a tree-flanked cut in the trail and saw the first glow climbing from the flames. It was something beyond the town that had just begun to burn.

"Batt's house! It must be his place!" They spurred onto a rise to see the fire licking from a corner of the judge's white cottage. And more flame was spearing from the big old barn some hundred of feet back from the house.

That was proof to the Kid. Even as they saw the first bunches of men pouring from the town's main road out toward the judge's home. "They," he meant Sabin and company, "started the fire! They'll be hitting the jail pronto. The fire's a diversion, Nichols!"

They threw gut-hooks to their ponies, losing sight of the fire as they were forced to swing around the big lump of squat hill between them and the town. When next they came in sight of the scene, Batt's house was burning merrily. in the illumination the black ring of men around it were clearly visible. The glow, staining the sky red, made the light of the weak moon a feeble thing by comparison. But they could tell that the black narrow tide streaming out of town toward Batt's was composed of men rushing to fight the fire.

They swung into Maverick by a curving side road, cut down to the creek to avoid the stragglers headed up the line for Batt's. A silence was settling over almost deserted Maverick. They scanned the road.

"Too quiet," pronounced Nichols as he pulled his guns.

The Kid nodded and dropped to the ground. "You can bet anybody heading for the jail now will be running a gauntlet going up that road. Sabin had his gun-spread in in strength. . . .There's Lobart's gun-hawks too. So—I better drift in alone."

"What, Kid?"

"I'm supposed to be one of them. . . .They think they've still got me duped, Red. I didn't protest about the plan to get Gregg—or Dean—out. Sabe? I can walk in there and mebbe jump 'em right in the midst of it—in the jail."

NICHOLS palmed his mouth as if to stop his gasp. "You gents slip in behind the road and come around to cover the front of the jailhouse," the Kid went on calmly. "Keep the gunhands from getting in when I bust a cap on them inside."

Nichols swung down from the saddle quickly, shaking his head. "You can't do that, Kid. You—" He grabbed at him.

But the Skull Man was already sliding away at an easy run, paying no heed to Nichols.

"Kid! Your triggers are dead and—" And Red Nichols was forced to break off lest he warn the gunmen who were hidden along the street.

The Kid even whistled lightly as he walked up toward the block of the dobie jailhouse set behind the marshal's office. No light showed in either building. Somebody called, "Hey, where're ya going?" He ignored it as he spotted two men lurking in a doorway across the road. He acted as if he did not see them either; acted like a man going along with nothing to fear. But his shirt was sticking to his back. It wasn't fear; the half-pint of icy-nerved man didn't know that. It was suspense.

Back in Iron Hill, just before he had gone down to jump Manders in his cabin, he had discovered something. It was when he had caught that noise in the brush and gone for his hardware. But he couldn't be certain of what he had learned. Since then he had no occasion to trigger; now, he was going to find out.

"And mebbe-so I'll live to tell about it—mebe," he muttered to himself with that grim humor of which he was capable in a tight. He kept walking. A light twinkled briefly behind one of the jailhouse windows, then was gone. Across the road, an hombre started out from between two ponies at a hitchrail, then caught the gleam of the moonlight off the silver trappings of the Kid's rig. He raised his hand in signal.

"Everything going all right?" the Kid asked as if he were in on it. The man nodded and said things looked good.

The crimson glow of the fire beyond the town washed down over almost empty Maverick. A dull mutter, the voices of the crowd up at Batt's, drifted down too. No other fire would have raised so much interest, and it had drawn every able-bodied male up there. The crackle and hiss of flames at moments drowned out all other sound. The men up there would be oblivious of what was happening down on the main road.

AS THE Kid expected, there was a man on guard at the door of the marshal's office, "Nobody's coming the hell in," he said. It was Scar Neck. He stood sneering. It was plain he too had been tipped off about the Kid's gun hands.

"Something's happened. I got word for Sabin."

"It can wait, Strant. Back up and—" Then one of the Kid's holsters gaped empty and a gun muzzle was sunken in Scar Neck's belly. Scar Neck never did know how it got there. He let go of his own gun that had been hanging down against his leg. The Kid ordered him inside, but there was another hombre inside the office.

The Kid acted as he saw a faint light down the covered passageway leading back to the jail block. He struck with the gun barrel and Scar Neck flopped forward against the other gunman. The latter's gun went off accidentally, report muffled as the slug buried itself fatally in Scar Neck's chest. His dead body pressed the other man backward, and the side-stepping Kid was around and had slapped the second man over the skull with his Colts barrel. The latter went down unconscious, buried beneath the corpse. The Kid jumped

into the tunnel in plain sight of anybody back there.

It was Washita Mount. "What the hell's going on, Kid? Say, where did ya come from? What—"

"One of the boys busted a cap on some gent outside who was looking for you, Washita." The fact that the report had been muffled against Scar Neck's body made it sound as if the gun had been fired outside. The Kid stood holding his breath, his own gun reholstered, the picture of an hombre looking for no trouble.

Mount scowled. "Come on back here," he said warily, beckoning with one of his own Colt barrels. And the Kid advanced to avoid suspicion. Somebody overhead in the jail building called to Mount. He vanished to go up the stairs, and that was a break against the Kid.

As he walked toward the low-turned lantern at the end of the corridor he was half blinded, moving from the darkness. Mount had sent a man down to take his place as a guard. That man was the foot-dragging Vetters, Big Man Lobart's bodyguard. He came down the stairs behind the lantern, sighted the Kid, and silently slipped around behind and beneath the stairway. Vetters had just waked in the gutter a short while ago from that blow the Kid had given him. His mind was just emerging from the haze and he remembered who had struck him down. Now he would pay back.

THE KID glided down to the base of the stairs just as others started down from the top. There was Sabin, grinning widely. After him came the prisoner, the man known as "Henry Gregg," with his oil-blackened hair. Behind him was Lobart; the Kid was surprised to see Big Man, the politician, actually taking a hand. Beside his hulk was the slim red-shirted one the Kid had glimpsed in the other room at the hotel. Just behind was Holy Ben Batt looking as if he'd rather be dead. Mount towered at the head of the stairs.

"You're sorta late, Kid," Sabin said. "Thought maybe you'd pulled stakes." They didn't need him any more, and they figured there was nothing to fear from the once deadly Kid. After all, his gun arms were as good as dead. "Move aside, Strant! We're going to be moving fast."

The Kid even shifted as if he would move. Up at the top, Mount of course had his big hands wrapped around drawn weapons; that was his substitute for thinking. Judge Batt had a hand resting on the butt of a holstered hogleg, set face crimsoning with shame as he felt Solo's eyes on him. The slim one with Lobart held a bared gun too. There was something vaguely and strangely familiar about the slim one's face. Sabin's shoulders blocked view of the hands of "Henry Gregg." Sabin himself had a gun stuck in his waistband.

The Kid checked those things. In another instant or two. . . .A groan travelled down the corridor from the marshal's office.

"What the devil's that? Scar! Scar!" Sabin called.

"Let's get out of here," snapped Batt. "Quick! Keep moving. If we're caught, you fools, we're all in the stew! For Gawd's—"

The Kid's eyes were so heavily, sleepily lidded the pupils were barely visible. And then his arms, blurred by the speed at which they moved, had slashed criss-cross fashion before his wasp-waisted body. He was going for his guns with the deadly draw of old. Sabin stared goggle-eyed. At the top of the stairs, Mount seemed frozen into a statue even though a movement of a couple of inches would have brought his muzzles to bear. They could not believe what their eyes saw. That draw. . . .

Back outside of Manders' cabin in Iron Hill, when he thought he heard somebody, Solo Strant himself had discovered it. As Dr. South had predicted, the possible recovery of the motor nerves affecting his arms might be sudden when it occurred. It had been.

Solo Strant had them jumped. That instant of hesitation had been enough. The slim red-shirted one grabbed at the prisoner, cried "John, John!" in a soft female voice.

The Kid's gleaming gun barrels swivelled free of holsters and around in the completion of the double cross-arm draw. He had them and—

VETTERS' bullet just grazed the Kid's side over the ribs. And, as Lobart's bodyguard leaped from beneath the stairs, his second slug whispered just beneath Solo Strant's hatbrim. The Kid had buckled sideward with the stinging pain of the shallow flesh wound; it saved him. One of his guns coughed, firing wildly. It was the prisoner who got in the next shot, missing the Kid by a hairs-breadth, and the Kid was moving like a tiger cat.

Half twisting, he shattered the lantern on the floor with a thrust of his boot, kicking it toward Vetters. The latter backed, blinded by the glare of the burning oil. The Kid shot him through the shoulder. Ducked close against the stairs that ran down along the side wall of the building. Then gunfire was pouring from the stairs. It streamed between the Kid and the passage running forward. And through the gunsmoke he sighted the figure of a gunman racing down from the marshal's office in front. The Kid was cut off.

He triggered once, twice, prepared to clear a way through. But the wounded Vetters lurched off the wall, bumped him off balance. The Kid missed both shots. Vetters staggered forward to catch the stream of lead pouring from the stairs and collapsed, practically shot to pieces.

Mount, leaning over the railing, pumped the trigger trying to get the Kid. His slugs chewed dents in the white-washed wall. A cloud, milky and filled with chipped stone and mixed with gunsmoke, mushroomed in the jail corridor. It was impossible to see anything but the livid stabs of muzzle flame for some moments. Briefly nauseated by the gash in his side, the Kid backed a little way down the corridor on the ground floor of the jail.

"Get Dean out! Get Dean out!" came Sabin's wild shout. It confirmed what the Kid had guessed. "Henry Gregg" was the supposedly dead Deaf John Dean.

Firing broke off for a few moments. Then men were coming through the smoke at the cut-off Kid. There was the large Mount and Sabin himself and two-three of their gun-slicks who had come piling in at the first shots. Zigzagging as he backed down between the cells along the corridor, the half-crouched Kid rode the triggers. He saw Mount grab at an arm as a gun fell from the hand of it. A flattened piece of lead ricocheted off the front of a cell and raked Solo right over the spot where Vetters had nicked him. He vented Sabin's hat and the man fell back and a wave of smoke closed in again beneath the low ceiling. The Kid's left gun had just gone empty.

He stuck the other beneath an arm and hastily rammed cartridges from his belt into the first. The ugly fact of it was, he realized, was that the next time he wouldn't have the chance to reload. And when his guns went empty—

THE metallic spattering sound as a gun chattered into life again. One of the trigger men had ducked into the open doorway of an empty cell and was firing around the corner of it. The gunsmoke drifted toward the Kid and he knew they were closing behind it.

"Dean! Dean!" came Batt's harsh yelp. "Get out! Get the hell out now and—"

The racket of fresh gunfire chopped off the rest of his words. Behind the smoke screen, somebody screeched in pure agony. It baffled the Kid; he was holding his fire. Then the haze broke and he saw the splashes of gun flame from down the passageway.

"It's that—Nichols!" bellowed Lobart. The ex-outlaw had done better than slip in the way and come around to the front to keep the gunmen from the road out. He had come in to back the Kid's play.

Solo's weapons opened their ugly chant. The gunman firing around the corner of the shell came reeling out with a shattered forearm, went

to his knees at once as a second slug took him in the leg. A slug whispered "Boothill, Boothill-l" as it fanned the Kid's cheek. The big Washita Mount loomed through the gunpowder haze in the same instant the Kid loosed lead at that spot. The Kid rode the trigger of one weapon again. Again. Mount came along, walking stiffly, unhurriedly. He seemed impervious to lead.

Then the Kid saw the two holes in his neck through the swirling smoke. The man was dead on his feet. It was some reflex action that kept him striding on. A yard from the Kid he broke and pitched into him. Solo was pinned against the back wall of the jail block at the end of the hall. He lost one of his guns in struggling to get from under the big dead man. And he had emptied the right one in shooting at him.

A cross-bar pressed into his shoulder blades from behind as Mount slid off to one side. The Kid's empty hand went back and came up against the cold hardness of iron. It was a door in the end of the jailhouse. A figure moved through the smoky haze, ducked back. The Kid wheeled and tugged at a lever and crashed back the crossbar and wrenched open the door. Night air hit his sweaty face and he leaped sideward through into the open, then grabbed the door shut after him.

For one of the few times in his life, the Kid was trembling; trembling with reaction. Still he could hardly believe there wasn't at least one slug between his shoulder blades. He waited. Nobody tried to open the door. No slugs drummed against the inside of it where he had been standing.

Inside, Sabin had swung the attack the other way. None of them had wanted to eat lead by plowing through the smoke at the dangerous Kid. They had wheeled, figuring he would be cornered for the moment, to try to cut their way through the tunnel-like corridor to the front road where the ponies were waiting. They hosed lead through the passage, forcing Nichols and his pard back into the office. Outside the door, the Kid started to reload his remaining hogleg. His boot slipped on something that gleamed palely. When he bent he saw it was his dropped weapon that he had accidentally kicked outside in going through the doorway.

MAKING certain both weapons had full chambers, he hustled around the corner of the jail building inside the high stone fence, ignoring the pain in his side. Moving in the shadows of the eaves above, he went up the side of the block. The fence ran up beyond the jailhouse itself, then angled inward to meet the passage connecting with the marshal's office.

The next moment, figures stepped from the dimness at the front corner of the jail block. The Kid's trigger fingers froze. The lead figure was the red-shirted one the Kid had seen twice before. Only now her hat was gone and the blond hair like ripe wheat, falling to her shoulders, was plain. It was a woman, Rosalia South, Dean's woman. . . .

CHAPTER XXI

THERE WAS an exit from the passageway connecting the jail proper with the office on the main road. They had come out through there, heading for the gate in the side fence of the yard. Rosalia had a gun spiking before her, a stubby-nosed .32. It was suddenly very quiet. She faced the Kid, moving sideward toward the stone fence. And behind her, hobbling with a bullet in his thigh, moved Dead John Dean, the man known in Maverick as Henry Gregg. Rosalia was protecting her man, battling to get him free.

The Kid started to glide sideward, trying to cut the pair off from the gate. He couldn't very well spray lead at a woman. It was a watching and waiting game. All three of them moved into the section of the yard dyed by the crimson glow in the sky from the fire up at Batt's place. The Kid heard Dean's tight curse. There was the crack of a shot inside the passage.

The girl and Dean were almost at

the gate that stood ajar. Dean managed to work it open. And then, over behind the corner of the jailhouse, Lobart lost his nerve. He couldn't stand the waiting. He wanted to get to safety. He pushed out and tried for a shot at the Kid, which was exactly the move the canny Kid was waiting.

With a catlike grace, he switched his body even as he jumped forward. He triggered once with both hoglegs. Lobart had "voted" wrong that time, and for the last time. Solo's lead found his massive flesh hulk, and then the darting Kid ducked behind a clump of grass as Rosalia fired at him. The bullet went over his head. Dean was hopping out the jail-yard gate.

The wounded Lobart bellowed, "A thousand dollars to whoever gets that Kid! A thousand dollars! Get me outa here safe and you'll get paid high! Get me out! Go get that Kid! Get him!" A born lobo or gunfighter would never have done that, never have put a price above all on his own safety in a showdown. But Lobart was primarily a politician, the breed who made it a business to be on the right side. He made it a business never to be trapped when something failed. He jumped behind the others and slammed shut the door of the jail passage. They had to blast forward.

If he hadn't lost his head, put his own safety blindly above all, he might still have slipped off. For Nichols, guns empty and pard wounded, had quit the corridor and gone out the front office before he could be trapped. Lobart and his gunmen have gone on through that way.

The gunmen came out into the red glow, in plain sight. The Kid's lethal Colts smoked away. Two of them broke in half. Another dived screaming into the high grass beside the building. A fourth simply threw up his hands, shedding his guns. At that tempo, it couldn't endure long.

THE WOMAN and Dean were practically out of the gate. Then the woman's scream pierced the deeper rattle of the gun reports. She backed into the jailyard again, half dragging John Dean. Seconds later, a bloody-faced Nichols and three of his pards charged through the gate. Nichols had gotten wise to the fact they were trying to cut free by that route. Rosalia fell against the inside of the stone wall, nicked in the leg by a stray piece of lead. Dean went crawling off through the grass.

The wounded Nichols and his men had their guns on Lobart and Sabin and their men. The job was about done. Sabin was down on all fours, bleeding in several places. Lobart sat down heavily, making bleating sounds. He was only drilled through the shoulder flesh. But he never did have the kind of nerve to play out his string when the odds weren't on his side.

As the gun thunder ceased to reverberate off the stone walls it was almost a shock to battered ear drums.

"You want more, Lobart?" the Kid called, advancing.

"No—no! I give up—and maybe we can make a deal, Kid! Maybe we—" the Big Man cried in an unsteady voice. He broke off when Nichols cursed him.

"They're pulling out," called one of Red Nichols' lobos. He was standing watch just outside the yard gate and could see the hired gunmen in the road hitting the saddle leather. They had heard Lobart's abject surrender.

"Reckon we better herd these coyotes into a cell, eh, Nichols?" the Kid said. Nichols agreed and spoke to his three men. They moved over to the handful by the door of the passage, checked them for guns, and shoved them inside.

Solo eyed Nichols as the two of them covered the whole proceeding. There was a man he had a personal score, and one hell of a one, to settle with. Too, a man who still lived with the job apparently over though he bore the Kid's always fatal bullet brand on his hand.

"You were right about him," spoke up Nichols, sleeving at the blood flowing down the side of his face as he gestured at John Dean half-sitting in a crumpled heap over against the front side of the jailyard wall. "You

were right, Kid. We got Deaf John Dean."

He moved toward him. "My guns are empty. . . .Slammed out the last shot just as they threw in their cards," he said casually. There seemed no danger in it. Everybody knew Dean was deaf. After all, he was called Deaf John; nobody had to worry about talking behind his back.

Then the Kid remembered that day at the trial. How Dean, when he was known as "Henry Gregg," had twisted around at the mention of Dean by somebody among the spectators. Solo opened his mouth to cry out; it was too late. Dean had heard about the empty guns. As Nichols stalked up, Dean twisted and made the play with a gun he had stuck inside his shirt. One of the Kid's weapons leaped level and licked its wicked flame-tongue.

The bullet entered behind Dean's left ear, killing him instantly. But there had been a second simultaneous report; Dean's gun. The bullet from it split Nichols' chest dead center. He sprawled in the grass still reddened by the reflected glow from the sky of the fire. Red Nichols had not given the lie to the Kid's bullet brand.

When the Kid stepped in the door of the passageway, men returning from the dying fire were entering the marshal's office up front. "What the devil's going on, mister? Was there some shooting? Is there something wrong in the jailhouse?"

The Kid, blowing softly at the smoke lazily drifting from his gun muzzle, looked down at Holy Ben Batt's body on the floor. He had been killed in the first stage of the fracas in the jail. Perhaps it was better that way, the Kid told himself. He answered the men up front.

"Jailhouse, gents? Mebbe you'd better rename this place the Slaughter House," he said with quiet grimness. . . .

THEY were up in a private room on the main floor of the hotel. There was the doctor, Sam Sabin, two of the late Nichols' pards, and the Kid himself. Sabin was there at his own request. He was bandaged up in so many places he looked like a man in his shroud cloth, half in and half out. They had had to carry him over from the jailhouse, bringing him in the back way to avoid the throngs milling in the street. And though he was badly hacked up by lead, none of his wounds were mortal. The sawbones gave him more than a fifty-fifty chance to live.

Sabin was making a confession, speaking it in a small weary voice as the Kid wrote it out rapidly across the table. "I want to get this off my mind, Kid," he interrupted himself once. "This ain't no attempt to save my hide by turning State's evidence. . . .You'll understand later." He had already asked if there might be a circuit-riding preacher around, been disappointed when the answer was negative.

There was no need to prod him. He paused only to motion for the sawbones to hold the glass of redeye to his mouth for another swig. He made a clean breast of everything, starting back with the Jacinta Valley affair that had involved him and his partners with Deaf John Dean.

"How that deaf coyote picked up all the information he did about the Jacinta thing, though. . . ."

The Kid explained that Deaf John Dean had actually never been deaf. Sabin made a wry face.

"Slicker'n slobbers, wasn't he? Made it a business to play possum in a way." He started to curse, broke it off midway, and asked the Lord's forgiveness. "He'd learn a-plenty with folks figuring he couldn't hear. Oh, well. . . ." He told about the killing of Randall whom they'd passed off as John Dean. "Still don't figure how that led in Red Nichols though."

While the Kid explained that Randall had actually been Deaf John Dean's brother, Sabin's face twisted in a brief spasm of bitterness. That was where their wily scheme had gone awry.

The rest of the details the Kid had figured out himself before the showdown. But there was one thing he had to know as he thought of Judge Batt laying dead down there in the

jail. "Now about this son of Ben Batt's that Lobart produced. . . . Where is he being held now?"

"Poor old Batt," Sabin said. "Hell, that wasn't Batt's boy. I didn't know it myself till Lobart told me just before we struck at the jail." Lobart had learned Batt's own son had simply vanished on the owlhoot years back. Then had produced somebody to impersonate him; Batt hadn't seen his boy in years and years.

THE KID sucked deep on his quirly as he paused in his writing, nostrils pinching with anger. "All right. . .Sabin, I'll make you a deal. Holy Ben Batt never went bad, never was in on this thing."

One of Nichols' gunmen swore. "By grab, he *was!* He sold out his dearly beloved Law, Kid! Didn't he?"

The Kid cut an eye at the lobo. "You know he did everything at that trial to hold the prisoner, whom he was sure was guilty. . .the man you and Nichols come back up to hunt out. . . .Batt's a legend in this country. He helped make it. Folks respected him like he was danged near holy. To kill that legend would be dangerous. . . ."

"What's the deal, Kid?" Sabin said, after swallowing some more whisky. He was paler than sun-bleached alkali. Pain jerked his eyeballs and

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Wherein lead and gore is scattered galore over a stuffed bird!

he bent as if to ease something inside him.

"This—is it." Solo stared at Sabin's hand flattened palm down on the table so the well-known bullet brand across the back was in plain sight. Sabin was going to make a liar out of that famed gun sign now. "I write into this confession that you say Batt was not in on it, that he caught you slipping into the jail-house and died stopping you—or trying to. The fact it was a little different never has to get out of this room."

"And you offer me, Kid?"

"Your life, Sabin. . .or a chance for it. It's contrary to Law—but I've been my own law before." He said he would guarantee to slip Sabin out to his ranch this very night, and then Sabin would have his own chance at getting clear of the country.

Sabin shook his head. "*This* is the deal, Kid. That woman, Rosalia. . . . Can you get her out? Do that and I'll sign anything you write. . . .She's such a pretty thing." A wistfulness came into Sabin's eyes.

The surprised Kid remembered how that rainy day on the porch Sabin had spoken about girls and love. Still, Sabin wouldn't be going with her. "All right, Sabin," he said, writing swiftly.

SABIN gestured with his head at the bullet brand on his outstretched hand. "Forget that, Kid. . . .It never bothered me none 'c-cause I knew it wasn't going to work on me. You s-see, I knew I—I was doomed anyway."

The Kid finished the confession. The doctor had to hold Sabin up by the shoulders as the latter took the pen to sign.

"You promise about Rosalia?"

Solo nodded. "You got my word, Sam. . . .She's in a room upstairs now. I had her moved from the jail. . . . Never can tell what an excited mob'll do. Go ahead and sign; it'll make Lobart's story about Batt look a lie." He smiled thinly. In this moment, he felt a sneaking liking for Sam Sabin. The man had nerve for the thing he believed in, his last illusion.

The pen scraped and spattered ink across the bottom of the sheet as Sabin finished his signature. Then his hand closed about the pen, snapping it in half, in a convulsion of pain. His other hand fumbled toward his heart.

"Doomed, anyway, Kid. . . .Y-Years back, a sawbones up to the c-city t-told me—me I had f-fatal heart disease. I—I f-fooled you, Kid. I—" The sawbones tried to ease him back. But even as he tore open Sam Sabin's shirt, the man was gone.

The Kid gave the confession to the doctor after the latter and he himself had signed it as witnesses. The doctor went out to tell the town about it in the gray dawn.

The tubby outlaw filled up three glasses with redeye. "Kid," he said as he raised his glass, "you know danged well it was you who licked the whole thing by walking in there solo fashion. It—shucks, sounds locoed coming from me—but it was an honor to be scrapping alongside uh you."

"Thanks, amigo." The Kid lifted his glass. "And let's drink this to Red Nichols. . .he was man-jack all the way through." His eyes jerked and focussed on the picture in the livery stable alley outside the window.

The duded-up Jackson Bartlett had been discovered hiding back in the hayloft. Now a bunch of townsmen had him, had him on a rail they were toting to the front road. The slick-eared lawyer's cravat was around under one ear. His stovepipe hat, half the crown gone, was jammed down over his head onto his neck so it looked like a monstrous collar. He was bleating away like a sick calf as he struggled to retain his balance on the jouncing rail.

"I—I'll get a court order on you! There is *some* justice. I will swear out a charge and—" he piped away.

"There'll be no charge—not for the coat of tar and feathers we're a-going to give you, mister!" crowed one of his captors.

The Silver Kid began to laugh with relief. . . .

(THE END)

GUNS DON'T LIE

By Harry Van Demark

And sometimes they can straighten out a murderer's twisted trail!

THE FADED blue eyes of Sheriff Jim McKelvey searched the faces before him. The only movement among the men in the little group was the flutter of a loosely-tied neck scarf, or the flapping of a coat in the biting wind.

The wind, however, did not seem so cold to Blaze Fowler. His heartbeats quickened as those cold eyes bored into him. He was a stranger in the Big Bend country.

McKelvey asked, "Who found him?"

There was a quick shifting of positions, an exchange of uneasy glances. Sheepman Hiram Downs replied:

"I found him, Jim, and it was my boy, Hank, here, that sent you word." He added, "We come over to see Zack about killin' some hawgs tomorrow. We run onto him just as you see him. The body ain't been touched."

"See anybody else around here?"

"Nope, jest Hank and me." On second thought he nodded toward Fowler. "This young gent come along about that time."

If Fowler had felt uncomfortable under the sheriff's scrutiny, that feeling was intensified now. He shifted his weight to the other foot as he struck a match, applied the flame to his cold pipe, flipped the stem aside.

The sheriff raised a huge snow-covered boot, crushed the match beneath it. He flashed Fowler a scornful glance. "I'll get to you later." Then to Downs: "Go on, Hi."

"Well, Hank went down to Mr. Fowler's cabin to borry his hoss. Fowler warn't home, so Hank started back, but he met him between here and his place, comin' in from a turkey hunt. Fowler said it was all right to use his hoss. On their way back they run into Jerry Gilstrap."

Gilstrap was a tall, angular cowboy who peddled liquor around Minosa and the neighboring cattle and sheep ranches. Only a small portion of his pinched face was visible under a broad-brimmed hat. His eyes were small, reddish, cunning.

Gilstrap carried a well-worn rifle. The bushy tails of two squirrels fanned the wind from a sagging coat pocket. Any man present would have bet that the heads of each had been shot completely away; Gilstrap could shoot.

A shivering hound with sensitive nostrils wandered up, sniffed at the reddish-brown blotch in the snow.

Downs said, "That's old Zack's dawg. Reckon he's goin' to miss him. Zack thought a heap of him."

"Get on with your story, Hi," urged the sheriff.

"Well, then John Bayes there and his brother Ike come down the hill road. I hollered at 'em. Melvin Stroud rode up about the same time."

Stroud, a small rancher, was heavy-set, smooth-shaven, with a pleasant face and expressive brown eyes.

Stroud nodded. "I'd heard shootin', Jim, ever since daybreak. Was afraid some o' these hunters might leave my back gate open. Got some wild steers in there. If they ever get loose I'll never see hide nor hair of 'em again. As I rode over the ridge I seen Hiram standin' here and when I come closer there was old Zack Barker stretched out in the snow."

THE ONLY man except Fowler who had not joined in the con-

versation was Whitey Williams. He operated a blacksmith shop at Minosa, six miles down the valley. His battered spring wagon, hitched to a team of bony bays, stood beside the road. A shotgun and a rifle rested on the floor boards, the stocks braced against a box in the bed of the wagon.

Williams reeked with the odor of whiskey. His eyes indicated that he was a heavy drinker. He nervously smoked one cigarette after another, always spinning his matches to the ground with a buzzing sound, then tramping on them.

He said, "I passed up this way 'fore daylight, sheriff. There's been a flock o' wild turks up on the ridge and I wanted to get a crack at 'em. I was headin' home when I seen a crowd over here." He bent over, knocked a handful of snow from one of his boot tops.

The sheriff waited for him to straighten up. "And you didn't stop when you passed the first time? I noticed where a set o' fresh wagon tracks pulled outa the main road before the last snow fell."

Williams shot a grim glance at the stern faces around him.

"Well, yes—I—that is—I—"

"Yeah, we know," the sheriff interrupted. "Zack Barker was one of the main sources of liquor supplies in the valley. So you stopped and loaded up?"

"Yeah—two bottles—but that was on the way out."

"What time was that, Whitey?"

"'Bout an hour before daybreak, I'd say."

"Did Zack go back to bed?"

"I dunno. He was cussin' like all get out for bein' woke up in the cold. He slammed the door in my face."

"Was it snowin' then?"

"Jest some scatterin' flakes."

"Get any turks, Whitey?" The sheriff's gaze focused on a brown stain on the blacksmith's coat sleeve.

"Two. They're in the wagon. Wanta see 'em?"

McKelvey shook his head, turned to young Downs. "Hank, get a wagon sheet or somethin' and cover up the remains till the coroner gets here. Then take this city chap home."

Williams said, "I'll drive him up there, sheriff."

"No, Whitey; you'll stay here with the rest of us."

Fowler felt relieved at the apparent shift of suspicion from himself. From the sheriff's angle, he reasoned, Zack Barker's killer could be any one of four persons:

Fowler, himself, who was seen coming in with blood on his clothes, albeit carrying a turkey shot through the head. Barker had been killed with a single shot which had passed clean through his body, and while he had apparently been robbed, this could have been a subterfuge to hide the real motive. Or—

Rat-faced Jerry Gilstrap, a marksman of parts, whose reputation up and down the valley was that he could plunk a spot the size of a quarter two out of three times at a hundred yards. He was a not-too-friendly rival of old Zack in the liquor business. Or—

Melvin Stroud, who had belligerently cautioned Barker at times about his "customers" leaving his pasture gate open. Stroud's story seemed plausible. So far no one had disputed it. Or—

Whitey Williams, on whom there was enough circumstantial evidence to make things uncomfortable in a court of law. He, apparently, was the last man to see Barker alive—except the killer.

Hiram Downs and his son, Hank, were free of suspicion, Fowler thought—at least, for the present.

FOWLER refilled his pipe, fished out a match, struck it on a button, applied it to the weed, flipped it away. Again the sheriff stepped on the match as it flickered in the snow. As Fowler started toward his cabin, the sheriff said:

"Better get your gun, Hank. I'm holdin' you responsible for bringin' Mr. Fowler back. Bring the city feller's rifle along just as you find it—and don't let him get his hands on it."

As Fowler moved off with Hank he heard the sheriff's voice again: "Hiram, Melvin, all of you, get inside Zack's place and shake up a good fire. Go light on the liquor and don't touch nothin' else. I'll be in directly."

Fowler moved on against the cutting wind, Hank trailing a few steps in the rear. Less than a mile it was, but what a mile! And what thoughts can crowd through a man's mind in a strange country, among strange men, with one of them crunching along behind him, a frozen smile on his face, a rifle nestling in the crook of his arm.

Fowler had been in the Big Bend country a month, taking the rest cure with a little hunting on the side. He was due back in El Paso the following week. On this particular morning, following the first snow fall, he had taken his 30-30 and gone out after the big gobbler whose voice had been inviting him. Upon his return he had met young Hank and learned of the tragedy.

Fowler and Hank were not long in reaching the former's abode. Fowler nodded toward his rifle which hung on two wall pegs. Hank took possession of the weapon.

The sheriff was still walking around the Barker place when they returned. He beckoned to them, led the way into the cabin, where a huge fire roared in the fireplace. A half-empty whiskey bottle sat on the mantel, surrounded by glasses and tin cups.

The sheriff removed his heavy gloves, held his huge red hands over the fire.

"Put the artillery over there, Hank, and thaw yourself out," he said cordially. He nodded toward a crude bed at one side of the room. An old marble-top bureau sat in one corner. Several chairs, no two alike, most of them with cowhide seats, and two benches completed the furnishings.

Hiram Downs leaned against the wall at one end of the fireplace. Ike Bayes sat back near the bed with his brother, John. Whitey Williams squatted in a corner. At one side of the door sat Jerry Gilstrap and beyond him Melvin Stroud.

The sheriff surveyed the gathering, pulled a red bandana from his pocket, blew long and hard. Then he straightened, spit into the fire and faced his audience.

"You that ain't got seats better get 'em."

Fowler sank into a chair. The sheriff continued:

"If anybody wants another slug o' old Zack's liquor, let him speak up and Hank'll pass the stuff.

John Bayes said, "Shore. Pass 'er round, Hank."

Hank handed him the bottle and one of the glasses, then turned to Williams. The blacksmith extended a shaky hand. Ike Bayes poured some into a tin cup.

Gilstrap waved Hank away. "I'm use to good liquor. I wouldn't touch that stuff!"

Hiram Downs reached over, took the bottle from his son's hand. Melvin Stroud got up, didn't sit down until he had drained his cup. Hank looked at Fowler.

"Reckon we can stand one, can't we, city feller?"

"It'll just about hit the spot," Fowler responded. He poured a little in a glass, swallowed it at a gulp.

THE SHERIFF said, "Now, Hank, you can take all the guns and pile 'em on the bed over there. And don't forget the pair out in Whitey's wagon." When the order had been filled, the sheriff continued: "Now, frisk every man here for short guns, hip and shoulder." As Hank went to work, the sheriff flipped back his coat, took a Colt .45 from its holster, laid it on the mantel even with his shoulders.

"Men," he said, "looks like somebody sure enough had it for Zack Barker. So there's been murder done. The coroner ain't said so yet, but we all know old Zack didn't shoot himself through the body like that." He turned to John Bayes. "We'll begin with you, John."

"Well, Jim, it's just like Hiram told you. Ike and me was drivin'

along the ridge when he called to us."

"Hiram, I reckon you sort o' relieved your mind outside a while ago. Anything else?"

"Don't know of another damn thing, Jim."

Melvin Stroud said impatiently: "Seein' the Downses were the first ones to find the body, they seem mighty ignorant about it. Or are you tryin' to protect 'em, Jim?"

A glint of anger appeared in the sheriff's eyes. "Hold your hosses, Melvin. Your time'll come to talk."

To Fowler the atmosphere seemed suddenly to have become oppressive, though the fire had lost its effectiveness. The dog had pushed the back door open, letting in a gust of cold air. Hank shut the door.

The sheriff smiled suddenly. "Whitey, how's the plans for your new shop comin' along?"

Williams looked up, startled. His hand delved into his pocket, brought out a cigarette and a match. He lit the weed, dropped the stem to the floor and stepped on it.

"Not so good. It'll cost a lot o' money. I'd hoped—"

"You'd hoped to get it by drinkin' up old Zack's liquor as fast as he could make it, huh? Or mebbe you had an idee you could borry it from the city chap, here, seein' as you been shoein' his hoss and he seems to have plenty of money."

If Fowler had been suddenly showered with a bucket of icy water colder chills could not have raced up his spine. Until this thrust he had been considering just what he would say when his turn came. Now he could not possibly have managed a word in his own defense. The sheriff continued:

"And dog my cats if some o' these city fellers ain't about the best rifle shots I ever seen. Fowler goes turkey huntin' with a rifle—and gets his bird. Hank says the head's half gone. Purty dang good shootin', I calls it."

The sheriff spat into the fire again. Men shifted uneasily. Chairs creaked. The dog got up, started out, changed his mind, resumed his place by the fire.

"It'd be interestin'," said the sheriff, "to see a shootin' match between Fowler and Gilstrap. They say Jerry ain't missed a squirrel's head in five years."

THE LIQUOR peddler got quickly to his feet. "Damn you, sheriff, leave me outa this! You know I ain't set foot on Zack Barker's place in a year until today."

"Keep your shirt on, Jerry. We also know that old Zack had the reputation of sellin' the best liquor in the county—and you didn't like that—no, sir!"

"You're trespassin' on the truth, Sheriff Jim. Ain't any man this side o' Lost River got any better whiskey than I have. I got all the best trade, too." He sat down, but not before his weasel eyes had thrown a hungry glance at his rifle on the bed.

"Oh, well, we're just talkin', Jerry. We're all still friendly-like." A chuckle escaped the sheriff as he produced a short-stemmed corncob pipe and a sack of tobacco. He returned the pouch to his pocket, struck a match under the mantel. With a cloud of smoke fogging his head he held the match stem before his face, blew out the flame, broke the stem between thumb and forefinger, tossed the pieces into the fire.

"Well, I reckon the coroner'll be here purty soon."

Fowler found himself breathing normally again. He filled and lighted his own pipe, tossed the lighted match at the fire, missed. Sheriff Jim trod on the flame, picked up the stem, flipped it into the embers. Then he became suddenly interested in the array of guns on the bed.

"That the new gun you got last time you was in El Paso, Melvin? Look like a plumb good 'un."

"Yeah. Latest model. Clean's a hound's tooth." Stroud proceeded to roll a cigarette, asked the sheriff for a match. He pulled it across a floor board, lit the weed, broke the slen-

der stem in the center, tossed the pieces at the fireplace.

Sheriff Jim picked up Fowler's rifle, examined it inch by inch, held it low in his hands and sniffed the muzzle. Certainly it had been fired. Fowler had not denied that. The sheriff examined the plate on the stock, placed the weapon against his shoulder, drew it into shooting position, pumped the lever. A loaded cartridge jumped out. McKelvey looked at the cartridge and placed it on the bed beside the gun.

He repeated this action with the other rifles—all, except Stroud's. "How d'you throw the shells out o' this thing, Melvin?"

"I'll show you, sheriff." Strong took the rifle, offered a demonstration.

McKelvey said, "Uh, huh—I see. Some ejector! I've heard these newfangled guns was bad about jammin'." He looked the rifle over carefully, placed it beside the others on the bed.

Slowly the sheriff resumed his position before the fire, turned his back on the others, began digging in his coat pockets. He placed several articles on the mantel—broken match stems, the butt of a cigarette, an empty cartridge shell.

Then he grimly faced the men in the room. "Mebbe you're way ahead of me—I dunno. But the killer of

A Message to All Americans:

The Victory Clothing Collection for Overseas Relief will start January 7, 1946, and continue through January 31.

In plan and scope, this campaign will be similar to the United National Clothing Collection of last spring which provided serviceable used clothes, shoes and bedding to millions of people in liberated lands. President Truman has said that the urgent clothing needs of millions of other people makes a second nationwide clothing collection imperative.

In calling upon Henry J. Kaiser to lead the nation in this second clothing campaign, the President said:

"Without adequate clothing and other necessities of life to sustain victims of war on the long road to rehabilitation, there can be no peace."

Mr. Kaiser accepted the President's summons. He said: "The call in behalf of war sufferers throughout the world will touch every heart which knows the quality of mercy . . . The determination and the assurance which you are daily bringing to the manifold and momentous problems of peace inspire the whole-hearted response and acceptance of your request."

Watch the newspapers for further details, and specific addresses in your community.

Zack Barker is right here amongst us."

A log in the fireplace burned through the middle, dropped with a dull thud. Fowler jumped as though pricked with a pin. Boots shuffled on the floor.

The sheriff said, "I'm givin' him thirty seconds to confess.

SHERIFF JIM began to watch the second hand on his big silver watch. Hiram Downs sprang to his feet. Whitey Williams half rose from his chair, his face pale.

Then the sheriff said calmly: "Melvin Stroud, I'm arrestin' you for the murder of Zack Barker!"

A string of curses poured from Stroud's lips. One hand disappeared inside his coat. The sheriff's hand flew to the mantel, closed around his forty-five. Two guns roared.

A glass was shattered on the mantel as Stroud's bullet missed its intended mark. Every man in the room was on his feet as the accused man sank slowly to the floor, a small, pearl-handled revolver dropping from his lifeless hand. The sheriff's bullet had hit him squarely between the eyes.

"There's a shoulder gun you missed, Hank," the sheriff said sarcastically.

Everyone started talking at once. Calm was restored only when the coroner strode into the room, took one look as the prostrate Stroud and gasped:

"Hellsfire! Thought you said it was Zack Barker!"

"Come over to the fire and warm up, Bill," invited the sheriff. "You got two of 'em to look after now. This sure has been an e-eventful day. Yeah—Zack's outside. Melvin Stroud killed him for his money. I reckon you'll find it on his pusson or hid somewheres around his house."

Hiram Downs voiced the thoughts of the others: "How'd you know so p o s i t i v e, Jim—about Stroud, I mean?"

"Well, the first thing that popped into my mind was that Zack and Jerry had fought it out over the liquor business. But that didn't check up. Then young Fowler acted kinda suspicious, but I reckon he was just nervous. Anyway, it didn't add up, either. And there was enough circumstantial e v i d e n c e ag'in Whitey to hang him a dozen times. But there had to be some spot where the killer stood. So while you fellers was in here guzzlin' whiskey and buildin' a fire, I set out to find that spot. I found it.

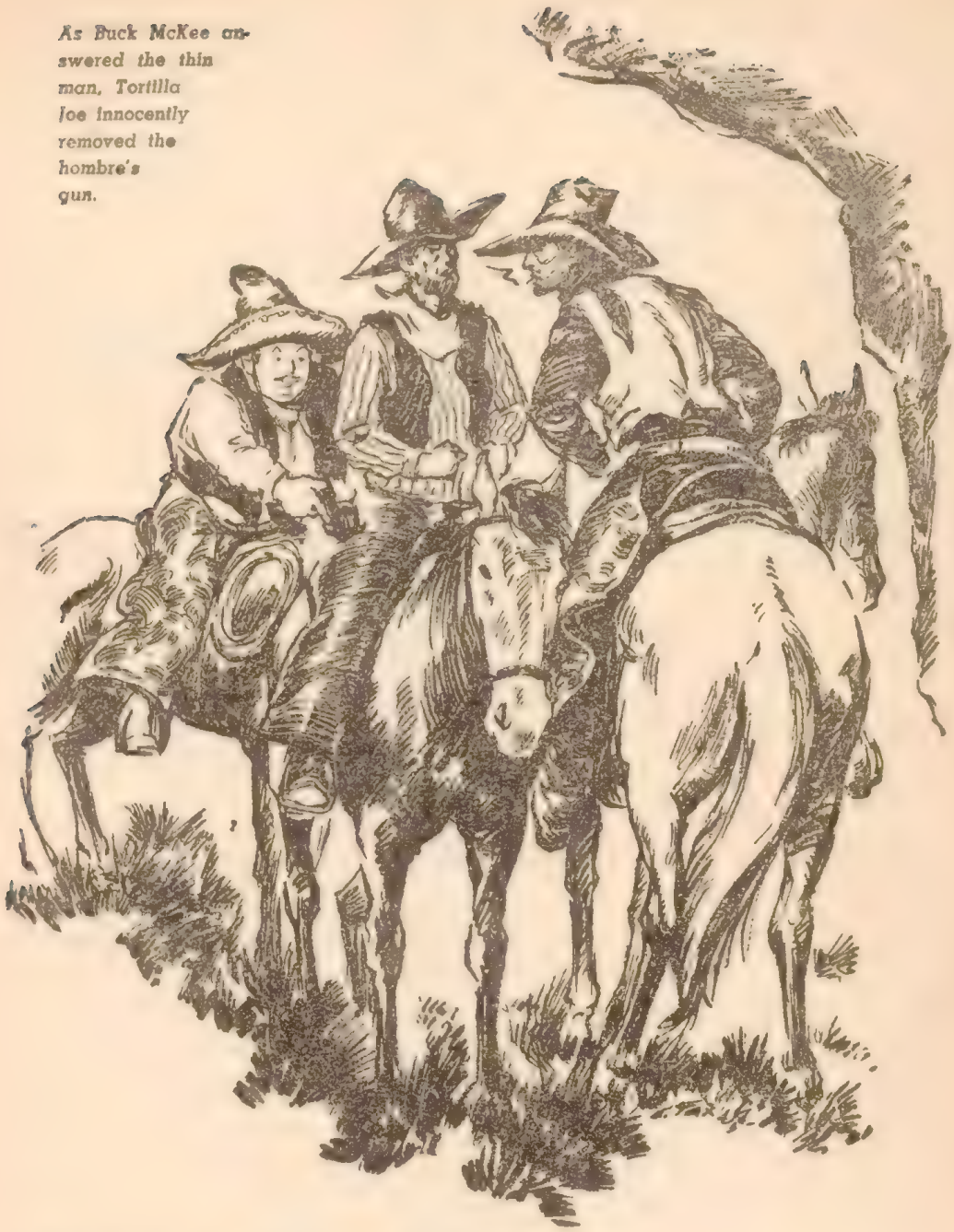
"Yeah, right up there on the hill where Melvin had hid himself and waited for it to get light enough to see his sights. He musta stood there quite a spell waitin' for Zack to come out. Smoked three, four them hand-rolled cigarettes. There's one of the butts on the mantel. I wanted to see who else smoked that brand. I kinda suspected Fowler ag'in, but he didn't have nothin' but a pipe." He wheeled on Fowler, who winced slightly despite his innocence.

"Young feller, if you don't learn how to throw down your matches you're goin' to set fire to somethin' valuable some day. Why, durn it, you just toss 'em away and let 'em burn! But that's the way I made sure you hadn't killed Zack Barker. Melvin Stroud allus broke his matches like the rest of us, 'cept Whitey, who allus drops his and tromps on 'em.

"Well, men, Stroud's new gun's got a fancy rubber butt plate, while them other rifles have got the old steel shoulder plates—and they're wore slick. Melvin made a mistake when he set his down in the snow. The print it left has got all them fancy little marks on it. Yeah, plenty o' evidence, I reckon. Mebbe you've noticed, too, that when them old guns throws out a shell they flies off to the right. Melvin's threw 'em almost straight back. That's where I found that empty on the mantel—straight behind them tracks in the snow."

Hiram said, "I reckon he knew you had him or he wouldn't gone for that fancy gun."

The sheriff shook his head grimly. "And say, Hi, he mighta got me. But he didn't, for I'm still here!"



As Buck McKee answered the thin man, Tortilla Joe innocently removed the hombre's gun.

BUCK McKEE - - Bull Nurse

By Lee Floren

***Wherein** Buck McKee and Tortilla Joe take up an outrageously peaceful occupation. Well, perhaps not too peaceful.*

BUCK MCKEE awoke with a start. He tried to sit up but banged his head against a two-by-six, so lay down again.

His tongue felt as heavy as lead, and there was a steam engine working in his skull—a one-lunged rusty outfit that chugged and puffed.

The voice hollered again. "Hey, Buck McKee!"

Buck realized suddenly he was under a building. Tortilla Joe, his fat Mexican partner, slept and snored a few feet away barely discernbile in the dim light. He rolled slowly over, every muscle protesting, looked in the direction of the voice. First he saw a pair of drooping handlebar mustaches; behind these was a strange, homely face. The man was looking in through the space between the floor and the ground.

"Who t'hell are you?" asked Buck. "And what'd you want?"

"I got a telegram for Buck McKee. You him? I'm the station operator here."

"A telegram?" Buck McKee slowly shook his throbbing head. "Last time I went through Dog Town there wasn't no telegraph—"

"The railroad built through last year."

Buck shook Tortilla Joe awake. "Be careful you don't bump your haid," he said. The obese Mexican stared at his surroundings, his heavy lip hanging. He swallowed thickly, winced.

"First we started out on beer," he said. "Then I remember we dreenk geen. Now where would they get geen in thees cow country? An' how did we get under thees place to sleep?"

Buck grinned widely. "Danged if I'd know, pard. Looks to me like we're under the Ace Dog saloon. Prob'ly got so loaded down we jus' crawled in here to snoose it off. That gent's got a telegram for me."

Tortilla Joe

Tortilla Joe studied the homely face and the handlebars. "He ees so homely," he said, "that the flies they weel not light on heem. But thees telegram bizness—who eet ees from, no?"

"Get out," snapped the man, "an' read it yourself."

Buck crawled out on his hands and knees. He got to his feet, his knees unsteady as he blinked at the bright sunlight. Tortilla Joe, looking like a dirty black bear, followed.

"The day," he said. "ees almost noon, huh?"

The old man handed Buck the telegram. Buck tried to spit, failed; he jammed the message into his jacket pocket. "Have a drink, old man?"

"Never drink while on duty," the old gent said. He turned and went toward the depot, a log building a block away.

"A strong willed man," murmured Buck. He and Tortilla Joe entered the saloon. It was cool inside. The bartender had just sprinkled water on the sawdust floor. He looked at them, smiling whimsically.

"What'll it be, boys? You sure had a time last night. Set 'em up for the whole town. Ain't a man on the street hardly this morning—all home with their heads in the rain barrel."

Memory came back to Buck with a flash. "I remember now," he said. He dug through his pockets. A dirty bandana, a jack-knife, a couple of .45 shells, a comb but no bills or currency. He looked at Tortilla Joe who had just finished searching his pockets. The Mexican's limpid eyes were without expression.

"Me, I have no dinero, too, Buck."

"Your credit's good for a few drinks," said the bartender heartily. He pushed out whiskey and tequilla. Buck tilted the whiskey while his

partner hit the tequilla. He felt better then.

"How long we been in town?" asked Buck.

"About two days, I reckon."

Buck remembered the telegram. He tore it open and read it slowly, his lips moving. Tortilla Joe watched him and saw the smile grow across his partner's whiskery face. Then that smile changed into a frown of wonder.

"Who she ees from, Buck?"

"Ol' Sam Taylor over in Shotgun basin."

"What he want?"

"Give me another drink," said Buck. He drank and then said, "He wants us to nursemaid a bull for him."

There were two bulls in the corral. One was a Jersey—a tawny, small brute with dark, pointed horns. He pawed the sod and bawled deeply, eyeing Buck and Tortilla with disgust, then lowered his head, his eyes glaring, and slowly advanced at them as they sat on the corral. Then he stopped, started pawing again.

"He ees a milk cow bull," said the Mexican. "Ol' Sam Taylor he would not buy heem, no? There she ees Taylor's bull." He gestured toward the Hereford.

A PARTITION had been built across the corral. The Hereford was a big bull with good blood. He was beef to his hocks. His coat was clean, sparkling and red, his massive white face studied them with a careful indifference. He chewed his cud contentedly and lazily switched at a heel fly.

Buck studied the beast carefully. "That's a blooded bull," he said. "Ol' Taylor prob'ly put out plenty for 'im. Goin' use him to breed up his range stock, I guess. I wonder how the ol' gent is gettin' along."

"I don't know," said Tortilla Joe, "an' I sure don't care. Always, when we see heem, we have trouble. Like the last time—"

Buck shrugged his shoulders. The sun felt good on his lean back and the chill of sleeping under the saloon had finally left him. "You can't blame all of that on the ol' man, Tortilla. We got too much to drink in that saloon that time an' wrecked it an' we woke up in jail. The ol' man was in with us, too, of course."

"But he didn't get us out," said Tortilla Joe. "We had to get ourselves out an' when you heet that jailer with that chair—"

"Don't mention it," said Buck.

They were going into trouble, and Buck knew it. Even now maybe a warrant for their arrest still waited in Saco to be served the minute they showed up. Buck gave the matter deep thought. It was fifty some odd miles to the Taylor ranch, and they could swing around Saco, and not go into town. Taylor had heard they happened to be in this town, so he had asked them to drive the bull home and that would save him sending a hand over after him, 'cause he was short-handed at home anyway.

"Ol' Taylor's daughter, thees Mabel, she ees home?" asked the Mexican.

Buck smiled. "Yeah."

Tortilla Joe regarded his partner with a new interest. "That is one reason you want to drive thees bull through, huh?"

"She's a nice girl," said Buck. "Been some time since I seen her, too."

It was a quarter after eight when I came out of the kitchen. Moon was still in his favorite state of being — suspended animation in a soft chair.

"Well, have you solved my problem?" I asked nastily. "What kind of screwball tries to poison you in a room crammed with people and then leaves a note to meet him somewhere so he can kill you?"

Adam Moon opened one blue eye. "There was too much prussic acid in your highball."

"Any amount would have been too much for my taste."

"And," he went on, "it would be far simpler to walk up to you in the street at night and pump you full of lead. It's not very complicated to murder somebody."

I was about to tell him to suggest that to the nut who was after my life, when the phone rang. I answered it.

"Waldo Haggerty?"

The voice that asked the question was hardly human. It had no tone or character, and it seemed to be drifting over the wire from a vast distance.

My fingers tightened on the handset. "Speaking," I said.

"Coward!"

There was a click and the line was dead.

Here Is a Thrilling New Mystery Novel

TWO MICE FOR A CAT

By Bruno Fischer

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COMING NEXT ISSUE

Tortilla Joe spat disgustedly down on the Jersey bull. That worthy pawed the ground harder, kicking the dust behind him. The Hereford stood contentedly, watching the smaller animal, and chewed his cud. Tortilla Joe climbed down and stepped up on his horse.

"Okay," he said. "Let's us geet goin'."

EVIDENTLY the corral belonged to the railroad company. It was somewhat apart from the main corrals, where the dogies were loaded for beef shipments east in the fall. Without dismounting, Buck leaned from saddle and slid the bar back on the gate. While he hazed the Hereford out, Tortilla Joe rode up to the depot. The window was open and he could see the old operator sitting at his desk.

"The bull," he said; "we are takin' heem, grandpa."

"Don't 'grandpa' me," said the operator testily. He didn't look up but kept on listening to the click of his key and writing on a pad. Tortilla Joe turned his horse and loped out to where Buck had the bull on the outskirts of town. The sagebrush was thick here and now and then they came to clumps of greasewood. A few spears of bluejoint and foxtail grew between the brush and the bull grabbed at these as he hurried along.

"He's hungry," said Buck.

Tortilla Joe patted his big belly. "Yeah, an' so am I," he said disgustedly. "But where will I get sometheeng to eat, no? We have no dinero."

"We'll ride the grubline," said Buck. "We ought to reach Taylor's outfit by tomorrow evening. Of course, that'll be drivin' this old fella purty hard but he's got some excess fat on him anyway. Toward noon we oughta reach that nester's outfit on Swan crick an' he's good for a mess of ham an' eggs."

"You theenk ol' Sam Taylor he weel geeve us a leetle for takin' home hees bull?"

Buck nodded. His head was settling down and life seemed almost worth living again. The bull ambled along, trotting a ways ahead, then grazing until they caught up with him. He seemed an amiable big fellow and a good citizen. Buck lifted his eyes and looked over the surrounding terrain.

The flat land stretched on all sides, marked by sagebrush and greasewood. Across the distance to the west was an alkali bed and dust whorls were moving lazily across its white surface. To the south the flats lifted and became a high bench, and beyond it were the high cold peaks of the Little Rockies. A tangled, brushy mass of foothills and pines showed at their bases, and in those foothills Sam Taylor ran his cow-outfit.

Buck loafed in his Miles City kak and thought of Mabel Taylor. She was about twenty-two now, he figured; maybe she'd got married, a pretty girl don't stay on the market long. Buck gave this deep thought and finally resigned himself to fate; they never had been very close, anyway, but that hadn't been Buck's fault. He realized, though, that it would be nice to see Mabel again.

They reached the nester's outfit a little after dinner time. The spread was down on a creek, and they shoved the bull into the barn and Buck shoveled some bluejoint hay into the mow for him. The bull set to work, switching flies and chewing industriously.

"Light an' get a seat," welcomed the farmer, a fat fellow wearing brogans and a bib overalls. "Us folks just finished but the woman has a lot more victuals that she can warm up a mite. So you boys are takin' this critter out to Sam Taylor's outfit, huh? Heard Sam was back east buying a hot bull some time ago. They tell me the mines have opened up again, back in the mountains from Sam—an' that Saco is full of miners an' their families. That true?"

"Couldn't say," said Buck. "Haven't been in Saco for a long time."

"Thought you was workin' for Sam."

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"We just happened to be in Dog Town," said Buck. "Sam heard we was there an' telegramed in from Saco to us to take the bull out. Thataway he'd save himself or some of his hands a long ride."

The farmer nodded. The meal was good and sat nice in Buck's stomach. Sowbelly, boiled spuds, gravy, homemade bread and plenty of thick creamy butter. The woman went into the kitchen after more bread and Buck jammed his elbow into Tortilla Joe's ribs.

"Don't eat so fast," he hissed, "an' don't eat so much. People'll think you never had a decent meal before."

"The same," said the Mexican, "could go for you, too."

THEY thanked the woman and went out on the trail again. The late afternoon found them in the foothills. There was a bunch of range cows grazing in a coulee and the bull promptly fell in love.

He plowed recklessly down the slope, with Buck and Tortilla pounding his hocks. The range bulls were still in pen and a few of the cows, seeing the big fellow, stared in surprise, then turned and loped away with their calves following. But a couple of others, being away from the masculine sex for some time, also felt inclined to fall in love.

They cut him out of the herd, and then he pivoted and ran back. Once he lowered his head and tried to hook Buck's horse but the pony was wise to cattle, and stepped out of danger. After about six or seven of these sessions, Buck took down his catchrope and built a loop. The bull was in mid-air when the rope settled around his horns. Buck was tied hard and fast; he settled on one stirrup. The bull hit the end of the rope, doubled over and smacked the sod heavily.

"Los Dios," breathed Tortilla Joe. "I hope you deed not break hees neck!"

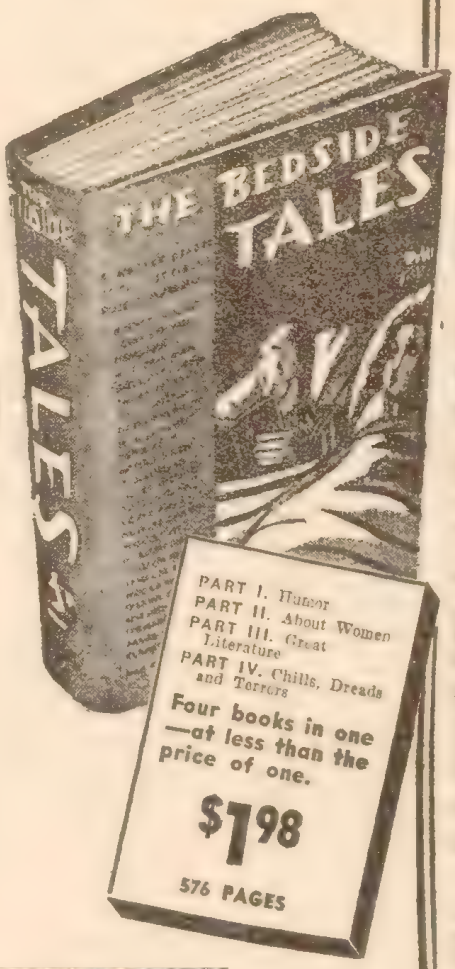
The bull got slowly to his feet, shaking his head. The cows, scared by the demonstration, trotted down the coulee, turned a bend and were out of sight. The bull decided that

(Continued On Page 94)

The pin up book of the year!

A GAY SELECTION
WITH AN
INTRODUCTION BY

Peter Arno



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enough was enough so he turned and, with the rope still around his horns, started south again. A few miles went by and then Buck, riding beside the big fellow, leaned over and got his rope loose.

They had supper with a horse-raiser on Big Pine, and that evening found them deep in the foothills. The murmur of the pines in the endless mountain wind made a purring sound of contentment. Buck roped the bull again and hobbled him. They picketed out their horses and rolled their blankets under a spruce tree. Sunrise found them on the road again.

They bummed breakfast at a cowman's linecamp, filling their bellies again on free grub obtained by the use of Sam Taylor's name. They gained a high ridge and Buck turned in saddle and looked appreciatingly down on the unrolling scope of land below him. And then he saw the rider that was heading their direction.

"Looks like somebody's followin' us," he said.

"Looks like eet ees goin' rain, too," the Mexican said. "Those clouds over the mountain they are rather black, no?" He too looked down on the rough terrain below. "But why would anybody be followin' us, Buck? No, maybe eet ees some hombre that ees ridin' to look for cattle or somethin' an' jus' happens to head our direction."

"Might be."

A FEW minutes later, looking backwards again, Buck saw that the rider was gaining, and that he was riding recklessly through the pine and spruce and over the boulder-strewn hills. Buck frowned and scowled and wondered who the fellow was and what he wanted.

They were in a small park between a growth of cottonwoods when the rider overhailed them. The pair pulled up and the bull promptly fell to grazing on the tall mountain grass.

"Hey, you fellehs," the rider called.

He was a long, seedy individual

(Continued On Page 96)

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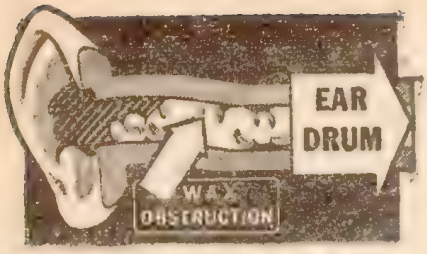

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riding a rat-tailed, linebacked buckskin gelding. His floppy old stetson was tied on with a strip of gingham and his buckskin jacket was heavy with dirt and grease. He had an old Colt that bounced up and down against his hip as he rode.

The thing that struck Buck the most was his voice. It had a high nasal whine that made the big cowpuncher smile. When the man got closer, Buck saw that he had a harelip and, from his words, it sounded as though he also had a cleft palate. His words were very indistinct and hard to understand.

Tortilla Joe had one hand in an open saddlebag. Buck knew that he had a .45 cached there. Buck thought of Sheriff John Cummings of Saco and that thought made him wonder if Cummings had heard he was in this section and had sent out a deputy to take them in for hitting his jailer with that chair and busting jail a few years before. But he threw that thought into the discard. This skinny man had no badge and besides, a deputy wouldn't ride up on them like this fellow was.

"What'd you want?" asked Buck.

The man pulled in his homely buckskin and without saying anything more he rode to where the bull was grazing. The Hereford raised his white head and regarded the horse and rider with indifference and then went back to feeding. The stranger rode around the bull twice and then drew up beside Buck.

"That's my bull," he said.

Buck didn't catch the nasal words at first. "What'd you say?"

"I'm Augustus Jones," he said. "That's my bull."

Buck leaned back in saddle and winked at Tortilla Joe who sported a broad grin across his thick lips. Might just as well humor the loco man, he thought. He said, "Sure, that's your bull, fella. We're jus' deliverin' it to your ranch."

The man studied him suspiciously. "You're tryin' to make a fool outa me," he finally said indistinctly. "But by gad I'll show you can't steal

(Continued On Page 98)

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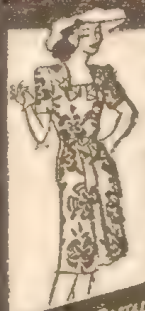

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my bull!" He put his hand on his gun.

Buck's smile died and Tortilla Joe's round face lost its joviality.

"You must be mistaken, fella. This bull belongs to Sam Taylor. You know Sam, don't you?"

"Sure I know Sam. He's got a bull too. You ain't stealin' this bull while I'm alive—"

Buck rode closer. He put his head close to the harelip's and said, "Are you goin' to stop me—?" The harelip jerked his head back and forgot to keep his hand on his gun. Tortilla Joe's grimy paw came in and lifted the gun from holster. The harelip turned in saddle and glared at the Mexican.

"Gimmee my gun!"

Tortilla Joe stuck the .45 in his belt and smiled. "You been chewin' the loco weed, no? Now you head the horse the other direction or I bend thees gun barrel over your head until it looks like the pretzel."

ANGER lighted the man's eyes and he swung his fist against Tortilla Joe's plump jaw. The blow knocked the Mexican out of his saddle and he hit the ground. He sat there sort of dazed, rubbing his jaw. Buck didn't know whether to laugh or get mad. He grabbed Augustus Jones by the front of his dirty jacket and dumped him on the ground. Hardly had the harelip hit the sod then Tortilla Joe had tackled him and spilled him. The heavy Mexican rubbed his jaw and sat on Augustus Jones.

"For a leetle fella he can sure heet hard."

Augustus Jones was puffing harsh nasal sounds. Unable to move the Mexican, he bit him in the thigh. Tortilla Joe drew back his fist but Buck held the blow.

"Let 'im up," he ordered.

Reluctantly the Mexican got to his feet. Augustus Jones got to his knees, shook his aching head, then got to his feet. He muttered something in a harsh voice, then walked to his horse. He rode off down the slope, quirting his horse for more

speed. Tortilla Joe looked inquiringly at Buck.

"What deed he say, Buck?"

"You got me," said Buck. He shook his head. "I had a hard time gettin' to understand anythin' he said. He acted like he was loony. You know what I figure? He aimed to highjack this bull off'n us."

Tortilla Joe's dirty forehead showed a deep scowl. "Thees bull, he ees not branded," he said slowly. "Maybe he was raised in the east, no, where they do not brand the cattles?" He did not wait for confirmation to his conjectures. "Maybe thees Augustus fellow he figure to steal thees bull from us an' put his brand on him?"

"Could be," said Buck.

The whole thing was a puzzle and Buck couldn't make much out of it. The only logical conclusion he could come to was that Augustus Jones was a crazy man. Because if the man intended to steal the hot-blood bull, he surely would have gone about it in a more logical and sensible manner.

"Thees name Augustus," wondered the Mexican. "Somehow she ees sound familiar. Now where before have I heard that?"

"Sounds familiar to me, too. Oh, yeah, I remember. Long time ago he was a king or somethin' of the Romans."

Tortilla Joe smiled. "I remember, too. Not Romans, though; the Greeks."

"Okay," said Buck. "The Greeks."

AUGUSTUS JONES hit the town of Saco just when the storm did. The pelting rain smashed against the log and pine buildings and rattled on the tin roofs of the miners' shacks. Sheriff John Cummings was in his office looking out the window at the rain and thinking how glad he was that he didn't have to go out in it. His under-sheriff, Happy Smith, dozed in a chair.

The sheriff saw Augustus Jones hurrying up the walk, his lanky body braced against the wind. "Damn fool," he mumbled, "goin' out without his slicker. Now I wonder what he wants?"

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Happy Smith lifted his head. "Who is it?"

"Augustus Jones."

Happy Smith lowered his head.

Augustus Jones could hardly speak with excitement and the cold. The sheriff couldn't understand him until he had repeated the sentence twice. Then he translated for Happy Smith.

"Somebody's stole Augustus' new bull. Took him out of the stockyards in Dog Town yesterday. Ceasar Augustus here says he trailed the thieves an' caught them an' they took him off'n his horse."

"I thought his name," said Happy Smith, "was Augustus Jones."

Sheriff Cummings let that ride. "Who are these two hell-eatin' scissorbills?"

With difficulty, Augustus Jones explained that, down in Dog Town, he had heard them referred to as Tortilla Joe and Buck McKee. Sheriff Cummings whistled soundlessly, then glanced at Happy Smith who was now wide awake.

"Them's the two that busted my jailer over the bean a coupla years back an' busted jail. That was before you come."

"Swear out a warrant for them."

The lawman shook his head. "The jailer took it as a lark, you might say. He said to forgit the whole thing, an' besides he's dead now."

"T'hell with that," harelipped Augustus Jones. "I paid five thousan' dollars for the bull an' now they're stealin' him." He straightened his chin belligerently. "What'd you aim to do, sher'ff?"

The man with the star sighed and looked out into the storm. "Reckon we'll ride out that way—the three of us—an' look these hellions over. But it sure don't seem logical that McKee an' that Mex would steal a danged bull. Go down to the cafe an' gulp a cup of hot java, Augustus. We'll be with you pronto. Meet you in front of the restaurant."

Augustus left, pushing his way through the rain. The sheriff listened to the roar on the roof, swore

(Continued On Page 102)

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(Continued From Page 100)

in disgust, then donned his slicker and southwester.

"Reckon we better ride out thataway, Happy, but it sure seems to me that McKee an' the Mex could do better than to steal a bull. Must be some mixup somewhere but as long as we're drawin' public money I guess we have to investigate. Damn, but I wish this rain would let up."

AT THAT same moment, some ten miles to the east, Buck McKee was wishing the same thing. He was riding deep between fork and cantle, his head screwed down in his slicker collar, riding herd on the bull. The bull didn't like the storm and, although he was tired from two days of travel, he still wanted to break into the brush.

"What time yu theenk we reach the old fella's?" asked Tortilla Joe. The obese son of *Sonora* looked like a fat bull himself—a bull on horseback wrapped to the horns with a yellow oilskin slicker.

"About dusk, I'd say."

Tortilla Joe frowned heavily. "Thees fella we meet back yonder, he ees got me to theenkin'. Maybe he deed go after the sheriff, no?"

Buck glanced toward Saco. But the foothills and jack-pine were obscured by the rain which had settled down to a cold drizzle. He turned his attention back to the bull. The hair lay curly and flat on the beast's broad back and sloping rump. This was a real bull, he thought, and he had good blood and would throw some good calves. And by hell, old Sam Taylor had asked them to drive him over and nobody was stealing that bull from him!

"We'll watch our backtrail, Tortilla."

They pushed on. The terrain was muddy and the side-hills were slippery. Water was rushing off the sandstones and outcropping to gush down into side-coulees and gullies. The bull fell once and got his left side all muddy. Before they had gone a mile, though, the rain had washed him clean.

They gained a ridge and there, in the pines, they drew rein for a short

breathing spell, because the bull was tiring. Then it was that Tortilla Joe saw the three riders behind them.

"Who eet ees, no?"

Buck had a pair of fieldglasses in his saddlebag. He dug them out, adjusted them, and tried to see through the drizzle. He looked for some time and impatience grew in the swarthy Tortilla Joe. Finally Buck lowered the glasses and looked at his partner in wonderment.

"One of 'em is that Greek feller," he said, "that Augustus Jones. T'other two I don't know—though one sure looks familiar. Now what the hell do you suppose that Greek is out trailin' us for? He must be a little bit off his feed thinkin' this is his bull. If'n he was a sheepherder I'd claim he'd chased too many ewes."

"Maybe he is a sheepherder."

"They're splittin' up," said Buck quietly. "See 'em going up the gullies. That means they've seen us an' aim to jump us figurin' we h'ain't seen 'em yet." He studied the bull thoughtfully. The weary animal stood rump against the rain and cropped hungrily at a clump of bunchgrass. "We can't make a run for it with the bull to ol' Sam Taylor's because the critter's plumb tuckered in."

"How far you theenk eet ees to ol' Sam's?"

Buck considered. "About three—, four miles, I'd say offhand. Too far to gallop whiteface here. No, we gotta make a stand outa it, Tortilla. Them sons ain't stealin' ol' Sam Taylor's prize bull while he's in my care. You know, this sorta has got my dander up."

"Me, too."

BUCK roped the bull by the head. Tortilla Joe, loop ready, rode in close, and caught the bull by the hind feet. They stretched him and threw him and Buck dismounted. He went down the rope, carrying a pigging-string in his teeth. He tied the bull by his four legs. The beast bawled plaintively at first, then gave up and rolled its big eyes. Buck straightened up.

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"That'll keep him outa the way of any stray bullets," he said. "Now we better leave our broncs here an' clumb the ridge where we can see below us. You take that outcroppin' an' I'll take this one. Good luck."

"Same to you, Buck."

The rocks were wet, and Buck slipped many times. But still he crawled slowly upward, moving along a water-washed ridge. About five minutes later, cursing the dizzle, he lay on the rimrock ledge, looking down below. Tortilla Joe was to his left, a little below him, laying on his belly on another ledge.

Two of the three horsemen had swung wide and were evidently trying to circle ahead of them. The third came riding up a gully. Buck recognized him as Augustus Jones and promptly forgot him. He turned his attention to the man on his right.

This man slumped forward in saddle, hanging onto a rifle he held across the saddle's fork. Buck thought he should have recognized him. He peered at the man, his memory going back—and then things clicked into place, the lost piece fitted.

He hollered to Tortilla Joe, "That's Sheriff Cummings!"

The Mex rolled over, looked up. "He ees come after us, no?"

Buck didn't possess any personal antipathy toward the lawman. He rather liked Cumings; liked his droll, dry humor. But a warrant was a warrant and Cummings was a lawman who would serve one. . . .Buck didn't know just where Augustus Jones fitted into the deal. But he did know one thing: he would not go back into the Saco jail. He'd get in there and that ornery jailer would throw the key in the river. And laugh at him from the safe side of the bars. . . .

He balanced his six-shooter across a rock, and took aim at a boulder about ten feet in front of Cummings. The distance, he knew, was too far for accurate short-gun work. The slope of the hill, coupled with the drag of the distance, would pull the bullet low. Buck let his hammer drop.

(Continued On Page 106)

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(Continued From Page 104)

The lead screamed off a flinty boulder. Sheriff Cummings hurriedly pulled in, swung his bronc around, and raised his rifle to his shoulder. He could not see Buck, and he held fire.

"Hey, McKee, I want to parley with you! Now, lissen here, young fellow, we jus' got a little misunderstandin' to clear up. Don't turn this into a shootin' match! Take it easy and—"

"—go to jail," finished Buck. He shot twice; both bullets threw mud close. Cummings couldn't see him but he shot once anyway. Buck heard the high whine of a bullet far overhead. He shot twice more, and Cummings had enough.

The sheriff turned his horse, loped hurriedly around a bend, and got out of sight. Buck reloaded his gun and listened to Tortilla Joe's shoes. Tortilla was peppering the ground behind the retreating Augustus Jones and the other man, who Buck figured was probably a deputy.

The trio never wasted any time in getting out of gun-range. A mile away, they met at a point where the gullies converged; they held a brief conference. Then they rode down the gully and the rain and the distance swallowed them.

Sliding down shale, slipping in the gumbo sidehill, Buck hurried down to where the bull lay. Puffing like a winded quarter-horse, Tortilla Joe soon broke through the wet rosebushes, his dark face showing a conflict.

"That was the shereef, Buck, an' he has a warrant for us. We stepped eento somethin' with both han's, no? What we do now?"

Buck thought briefly. "Only one thing to do," he said quietly. "Untie ol' 'whiteface' an' whip the hell outa him an' head for Sam Taylor's. Deliver the bull an' then drift out jus' as fast as we come in an' put some distance between us an' that lawman."

"But my belley, she ees hongry. My gunbelt buckle ees rub a callous on my spine inside."

Buck had to smile. "We'll grab a mess of somethin' we can eat on the

run, fella. But we better rattle our hocks."

While Buck untied the bull, Tortilla Joe mounted and led Buck's horse out of concealment. Buck jerked the pigging-string loose and the bull lumbered to his feet. His eyes were sharp and wicked and he lowered his head and pawed. Buck ran for his horse, anchored a stirrup, and swung up. He slapped the bull hard across the rump with his stiff wet catchrope.

"Give 'im the works, Tortilla!"

SHERIFF CUMMINGS and Happy Smith and Augustus Jones did not ride back to Saco. The sheriff, convinced now that he was dealing with two crazy cow-thieves, decided to ride to the Taylor ranch and there enlist the aid of old Sam Taylor and his punchers in running down Buck McKee and Tortilla Joe.

Augustus Jones was in a-lather. Despite the cold rain, he was sweating. Every jarring lope of his horse took him farther away from his bull. The bull he had paid five thousand hard-earned dollars for. Sheriff Cummings saw the harelip's discomfiture and had to sneak a small smile at Happy Smith.

But Happy Smith didn't answer that smile. He was cold and wet, and all because of a bull. And besides that, a couple of Tortilla Joe's bullets had landed too close. Happy Smith didn't mind being an under-sheriff but tackling a couple of crazy men was another matter.

When they reached the Taylor spread, they were three wet to the bone riders. They pulled in in front of the kitchen door, their horses splattering mud across the low porch.

"Hello the house!" hollered Sheriff Cummings.

Old Sam Taylor hobbled out. He was a wizened, dried-up runt of about seventy who'd fought Indians and the drought and cowthieves. His watery eyes ran out over the trio.

"Light an' rest your stirrups."

"Light, hell," growled the sheriff. "We got two mad men to pick up. That danged McKee an' that Mex is wild again. They just about salted us down with lead a few miles back."

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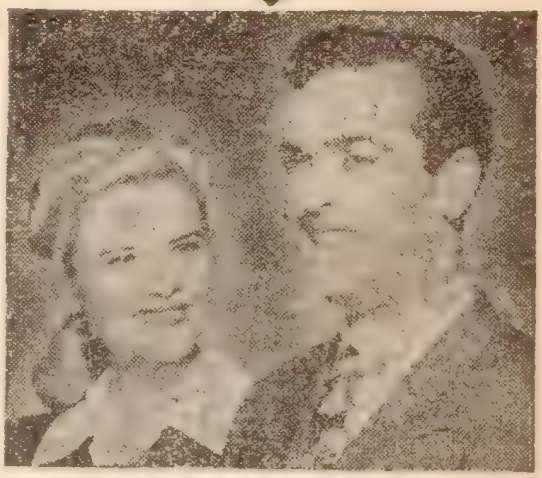

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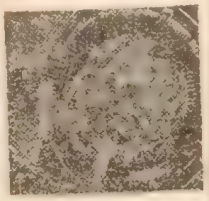

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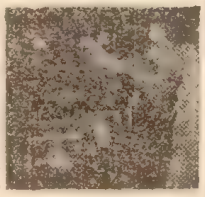

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"What you got again' them?" asked Taylor. "You usin' that ol' warrant?"

"That charge is done forgot," declared the sheriff big-heartedly. "But they done stole Augustus Jones' bull down in Dog Town an' they're headin' this way with it, the fools."

"Stole his bull?"

Augustus Jones shivered in his shirt sleeves. Mabel Taylor had come out on the porch and stood behind her dad. What old Sam lacked in looks, his daughter made up for. Augustus Jones looked at her and wished he didn't have a harelip.

"Yeth," he lisped, "they stole my bull."

"There must be some mistake," said old Sam. He was building the thing in his mind and he didn't see where the pieces fit. "I had a bull shipped into Dog Town an' McKee and the Mex are bringing it out for me."

Augustus Jones looked at him. "A registered bull?"

Old Sam Taylor nodded. "You gents better come inside," he said. "McKee an' Tortilla Joe'll be along right smart, I think. Mabel jus' finished some cookies an'—"

BUCK MCKEE and Tortilla Joe drove "whiteface" hard. They crashed through the brush, slid down declivities, loped across gumbo flats. The bull's hoofs threw up mud and rocks in their faces. They slapped him with their catchropes, and beat him hard. The bull swung his tail around and bawled once or twice.

Buck didn't know what it was all about. The only thing he could figure was that somehow the sheriff had found out that he and Tortilla Joe were in this section. And Buck didn't want to go to jail. That jailer once get him in the Saco can and he'd never get out—

About fifteen minutes later, with the bull slobbering and panting, they rode off the slope behind the Taylor ranchhouse. The place lay sprawled out among the pine and spruce of a mountain creek. The bull saw the barn and headed for its open door. He swung around the corner of the house, slipped and slid on his side in

(Continued On Page 110)

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(Continued From Page 108)

the mud, then scrambled to his feet and trotted into the barn.

"By grab," said Buck thankfully, "we got him here!"

"Look," grunted Tortilla Joe.

For the first time, Buck saw the three horses in front of the porch. He recognized them as the three that the sheriff and Augustus Jones and the deputy had ridden. Then he saw the five people standing on the porch watching them. He swallowed twice as he saw it was the sheriff, Augustus Jones, the deputy, old Sam Taylor and Mabel.

Old Sam called, "Come on in, Buck."

"We could make a run for it," said Tortilla Joe, huskily.

"Yeah," said Buck cynically, "an' get shot from saddle with a rifle. No dice, fella, we're done."

They rode up to the porch and old Sam came out to meet them. Buck saw that his weather-beaten face was red with anger. "Did you drive *that* bull out from Dog Town?" he demanded, jabbing a stubby thumb toward the barn.

Buck was wet to the hide; he was hungry, tired. And old Sam's tone angered him. "Looks like it, don't it!" he snapped. "An' this nitwit here—" he gestured toward Augustus Jones—"tried to take him away from us. He claims he owns him, I guess. He talks like his mouth's fulla hot mush."

"That ain't my bull!"

Buck studied the runty cowman, glanced at Tortilla Joe, and then swung his gaze back on old Sam. "It ain't?"

"My bull's a Jersey bull. Why, you rattle-brained, no-good—That bull belongs to Augustus Jones!"

Buck's anger broke, he started to dismount. Then he eased back. "If'n you weren't so danged old, Sam, I'd—What're you, a cowman, doin' with a Jersey bull?"

"I aim to start a dairy an' deliver milk in Saco. If you'd only asked the depot man—or listened to Augustus back yonder—"

"I tell you, I couldn't understand him." Buck glared at Sheriff Cum-

(Continued On Page 112)

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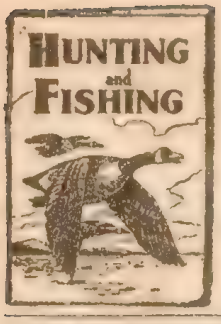

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(Continued From Page 110)

mings. "An' you figger on servin' that warrant, huh?"

"No, no, no," corrected Cummings hastily. "I just rode out with Augustus. That jailer died—n a t u r a l causes."

"A puncher killed him," corrected old Sam.

"Oh, yeah," said Cummings. "I ain't got no charge against you, McKee. Nor you either, Tortilla Joe."

The irony of the situation suddenly hit Buck, and he had to laugh. He dismounted and old Sam stuck a bottle of rye in his mouth. The whiskey was hot and satisfying, and he smiled at Mabel, who smiled back.

"Dinner's ready, Buck."

Tortilla drank and said, "Anytheeng to drown out the memories of thees day," and tilted the bottle again.

Mabel turned and walked toward the kitchen and Buck admired her trim back. "This day ain't gonna be too bad," he said.

(THE END)

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You wouldn't believe it, but I myself used to be a 97-lb. weakling. Fellows called me "Skinny." Girls snickered and made fun of me behind my back. I was a flop. THEN I discovered my marvelous new muscle-building system—"Dynamic Tension." And it turned me into such a complete specimen of MANHOOD that today I hold the title "THE WORLD'S MOST PERFECTLY DEVELOPED MAN."

That's how I traded in my "bag of bones" for a barrel of muscle! And I felt so much better, so much on top of the world in my big, new, husky body, that I decided to devote my whole life to helping other fellows change themselves into "perfectly developed men."

What Is "Dynamic Tension"? How Does It Work?

When you look in the mirror and see a healthy, husky, strapping fellow smiling back at you—then you'll be astounded at how short a time it takes "Dynamic Tension" to GET RESULTS!

"Dynamic Tension" is the easy, NATURAL method you can practice in the privacy of your own room—JUST 15 MINUTES EACH DAY—while your scrawny shoulder muscles begin to swell, ripple . . . those spindly arms and legs of yours bulge . . . and your whole body starts to feel "alive," full of zip and go!

One Postage Stamp May Change Your Whole Life!

As I've pictured up above, I'm steadily building broad-shouldered, dynamic MEN—day by day—the country over.

2,000,000 fellows, young and old, have already gambled a postage stamp to ask for my FREE book. They wanted to read and see for themselves how I'm building up scrawny bodies, and how I'm paring down fat, flabby ones—how I'm turning them into breath-taking human dynamos of real MANPOWER.

Take just a few seconds NOW to fill in and mail the coupon at right, and you will receive at once my FREE book—"Everlasting Health and Strength" that PROVES with actual snap-shots what "Dynamic Tension" has done for others—what it can do for YOU! Address CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 412, 115 East 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y.

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